Educational Communities, Arts-Based Inquiry, & Role-Playing: An American Freeform Exploration with Professional & Pre-Service Art Educators

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

This research employs American freeform role-playing games as a media for participatory arts-based inquiry into the relationships and perspectives of professional and pre-service art educators. The role-played performances and participatory discourse re-imagine relationships within a collaboratively imagined educational community that parallel ones from the professional lives of art educators, such as those between school administrators, staff, teachers, students, and parents. Participants use the roles, relationships, and settings they construct to explore themes and situations that they identify as being present in educational communities. These situations represent points of intersection between members of an educational community, such as parent-teacher conferences, community advocacy meetings, or school field trips. The data from each experience takes the form of personal reflections, participant-created artifacts, and communal discourse. By assuming various roles and reflecting upon them, participants gain access to experiences and points of view that provoke reflection, develop leadership capabilities, and enhance their capacity for affecting change within an educational setting.
Dedication

To my wife Alissa and to all of our family & friends for making this journey possible.
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The guidance and insight of my advisor, Dr. Christine Ballengee-Morris, was integral to the construction of this work, as was the support and feedback of Dr. Clayton Funk, who helped put me on this path.

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Lastly I want to again thank my wife, Alissa Cox, as the most amazing partner, companion, and critic I could ever hope to have.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Central concept

This study is based on the argument that an alteration of participant perceptions of educational communities would alter their context within it (Sullivan, 2010). My research uses participatory arts-based inquiry through American freeform\(^1\) role-playing games (Stark, 2014) to explore in the discourse of power within schools as seen by art educators. Practicing and pre-service art educators who participate as part of a community of play assume a variety of roles (such as a staff member, parent, or student) and improvise scenarios in a collectively imagined educational community in an exploration of the relationships between those roles. Role-playing games (RPGs) were suited to this application because their players assume the ability to define and redefine the properties of an imaginary world (Montola, 2008) through a game’s system of rules, which serve as a framework for communal storytelling and identity alteration (Bowman, 2010).

\(^1\) American freeform draws many techniques from other freeform games, such as jeepform, some of which were referenced during the research. It is also worth noting that some of the attributes of freeform are also common in other genres of larp.
American freeform

American freeform RPGs are a semi-live combination of narrative tools from “tabletop” RPGs, which occur primarily within the imagination of the players, and larps\(^2\) (live-action role-playing), which employ a physically embodied approach. American freeform games have few rules to memorize, require little in the way of tools and props, and draw on personal and accessible experiences familiar to players (Stark, 2014), traits that make the games accessible to a range of players and keep the focus on the experience of play rather than on its rules. American freeform games also use “meta-techniques” (Stark, 2014, p.12) to explore cognitive, emotional, and social spaces in a manner that is not strictly mimetic, such as how a character may “monologue” to voice the internal dialogue of a character or how diegetic time might be “rewound” or “fast forwarded” so that encounters occur in a non-linear manner. The immediacy of the experience paired with the disruption of these techniques enhances the games capacity for meta-cognition and reflection.

My Positioning

Many different experiences inspired the creation of this research, but the most critical was the loss of my father-in-law to suicide. At his wake was a seemingly endless stream of friends and family came to pay their respects, which made me think about all the lives he had made a difference in without his ever fully realizing the impact he had.

\(^2\) In the United States larp is sometimes written as LARP, representing its history as an acronym for live action role-playing (Stark, 2012). However it has become common to use the word independently of its roots, like the words “scuba” or “laser”, and this is the manner in which I employ it. The term is usable as a description both of a type of game and the act of playing the game.
The actions and the experiences he had shared with others had affected each of us differently, and each of us would incorporate those events into our own relationships, which in turn go on to affect the lives of even more people. It could be said that his life will eventually affect the entire world, though that is far past any person’s ability to see. The fact that he would never know how much his life mattered to each of us gathered in our grief was very saddening, much less the difference I believe he made for the world as a whole. I reflected that we all share this constricted vision, from which we are incapable of appreciating the palpable differences made through our relationships because their effects occur in different lives, at different times, and in different places. Our contexts are inextricably linked in a massive tangle of relationships, and yet we appear to ourselves as wholly separate and autonomous entities. For me the heart of my research was my desire to piece together the puzzle of this hidden discourse, and make visible the connectedness that was never more fully real nor more necessary to me than when I was in the depths of loss.

To do so with the entirety of our existence is beyond the scope of what can be accomplished in a single research project, or quite probably a single life, and so I focused my attention on schools and the ways that art teachers see them. I did so because it was a system I knew well, cared a great deal for, and knew from experience would benefit from such a reflection. My point of view about relationships in education drew on my time as an art teacher in a private school, as well as the oddly layered vision I have experienced in my roles as a student, student-teacher supervisor, and instructor at the Ohio State University.
From this standpoint I see the intersections of institutional policy, teacher intentions, and student needs or desires are one of the least examined aspects of life in an educational community while simultaneously being the most omnipresent force to affect education. I reasoned that an investigation of these relationships might begin by imagining what they look like from a different point of view, from that of a student, parent, or administrator, rather than focusing on how they impacted the portion of the community most familiar to art educators.

My tool for this inquiry, American freeform, was suggested by a friend for an assignment in which I wanted to use role-playing as a technique for understanding the work of Michel Foucault (1984)\(^3\) and his conception of how authoritative structures manipulate the relationship between power and knowledge to encourage people to transform themselves into objects that serve those structures. I chose to use a role-played experience because I had realized my own tendency to see Foucault’s conclusions as accurate only for people other than myself, an attitude that would be more readily challenged through the distancing lens of an RPG’s constructed reality. The result was the game *What to do about Michael?*, wherein players took on the role of authorities at a private school having a meeting about a student named “Michael”, whose troubles at school were based on those experienced by Foucault himself\(^4\).

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\(^3\) Drawn particularly from *The means of correct training* from *Discipline and punish*, p.188-205

\(^4\) These events were adapted from those described by James Miller in *The passion of Michel Foucault* (1993)
The lived experience of the game heightened my understanding of one of Foucault’s (1980) ideas, that power is not something that can be “had” but is instead a fluid aspect that is part of the continual discourse between the multiple relationships that constitute a person, a society, and our world. In this sense I realized that what we thought of as ourselves or of the people we encounter could only ever be a partial view, limited by the experiences we could use to approximate the lives and outlooks of others. Or, as Foucault (1970) describes it, “All representations are interconnected as signs; all together, they form, as it were, an immense network; each one posits itself in its transparency as the sign of what it represents; and yet – or rather, by this very fact – no specific activity of consciousness can ever constitute a signification” (p. 65-66)

The affordances I found RPGs present for embedding, unveiling, and exploring knowledge through collaborative experiences changed the games from just a long-time hobby into the media that I prefer to use to create and explore artistic experiences, and foreshadowed the creation of my article for the *International journal of education through art: Role-playing games in arts, research and education* (Cox, 2014). In that article I described a self-revelation that occurred while role-playing in *The Tribunal* (Harviaienen, 2012), wherein I confronted character traits and tendencies that had been invisible to me, specifically my tendency to question others in order to try to control my environment. The experience led to my conviction that freeform role-playing had untapped potential for examining and reflecting on the kinds of relationships I planned to explore in my research.
After assuming American freeform as my primary media for creating research and artistic experiences, I applied its form and techniques to my coursework, utilized its capacity for communal narrative and expression in my studies of action research and narrative theory, interviewed various game designers and organizers, and constructed several small studies that focused on the nature of building a community of play. The intersections of art and role-playing in the construction of meaning I discuss in this work still harkens back to the Foucauldian roots it sprang from, in that it regards the ultimate goal not as the creation of a product but as an individual and emergent meditation on existence itself (Tanke, 2009, p.169-170).

**Statement of Problem**

The essential issue I am working with is the erosion of barriers that isolate the members of educational communities. These barriers are part of what subjugate members to become what Foucault (1980) describes as the “real agents” of authority: the families, parents, and authorities that “have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful” (p.100-101). In *Self-Improvement*, Hacking (1986) elaborates that Foucault believed when we act upon others as agents of a system, we contribute to our own oppression. Resisting this insidious internalized subjugation is difficult because it is invisible to us since, as Foucault (1980) points out, “individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p.98). As conduits of power we accept the authority of that power into our own identities, which prevent us from comprehending the systems we are complicit in.
Within an educational community teachers and administrators come to see themselves as functionaries in a “system geared to turning out products” (Greene, 1988, p.13) to meet expectations that appear to have little to do with education or the ability to make meaning of the world. The physical, temporal, social, and emotional walls between these members inhibit the potential each has to learn and grow from one another. Many art teachers give up explaining the value of what they do to parents and professionals in their communities, due to frustration with the isolation they feel. They hope instead that their students will have such an appreciation of their class that they will one day be moved to make the world more understanding of their worth. However, limiting discourse in this manner prevents the community as a whole, including students, colleagues and parents, from having full access to the opportunities the arts present. Since the context a person occupies inevitably defines their perceptions, this restricts an art teacher’s ability to perceive the value of what those other figures offer as well. Time, space, and assumptions of merit erect invisible barriers that obstruct our ability as individuals and as a community to make education meaningful.

While there is a belief that teaching can break through the emotional and cognitive barriers of an institutionalized system for students (Greene, 1995), boredom, frustration, fear, and isolation are not confined to the lives of the students, and such obstacles pervade the daily lives of all the members in an educational community.
A failure to confront the human experience of those emotions is inherent to the act of ceding one’s will in a self-transformative act of objectification (Foucault, 1984), a separation from others that reduces agency and inhibits possibilities. My research pushes against those barriers because in it community represents not just the subject of the arts-based inquiry, but also as a performative media for artistic inquiry. It wasn’t designed as a simulation or as a tool to evaluate schools, but to serve as a shared space for communal reflection and exploration of thoughts and feelings art educators have about the roles at play within an educational community. Participants act as artists and researchers in a community of inquiry (Irwin, 2004), and rely on the capacity of their artistic experiences to “begin with the overly familiar and transfigure it into something different enough to make those who are awakened hear and see” (Greene, 1998, p.129).

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5 As opposed to objectification through separation or classification which are instead impressed upon a person
Research Puzzles

The term “research puzzle” (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013) refers to an approach to an exploration of media, methods, and ideas that doesn’t necessarily have “answers” so much as observable reactions and responses, as is the intent here. The meaning made of these puzzles is a construction composed both of its pieces and of those who participate in the arrangement of those pieces. The puzzles I have chosen relate to how our community of inquiry highlights and investigated:

- Where do power relations affect discourse in an educational community?
- How and why individuals in educational communities align themselves with the interests of particular groups (teachers, parents, administrators, staff, students, etc.)?
- How do individual art educators convey solutions to personal, professional, and relational risks?
- Whose understanding of the role or purpose of education should take precedence in educational communities?
- What effect does using American Freeform as a media for arts-based inquiry have for knowledge creation and the development of relationships for the participants?
Related Literature

The discourse within the dissertation.

The puzzle pieces of this investigation drew from several philosophies and methodologies, and the application of the ideas did not fall neatly into a pre-existing framework. This was for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, the research was "kind of" like a lot of things, in much the same way that role-playing games are "kind-of" like theater (Bowman, 2015). They were similar enough that the terms from one domain can describe ideas from another, though that brings with it some assumptions of understanding that are inaccurate. The other reason is that I designed these ideas to be engaged in discourse with one another, a tension that is useful when left "unresolved" as it allows for the ideas to be left in a state of play (Hans, 1981) that invites new interpretations and possibilities.

It is important to note that the way the term “discourse” was used in this dissertation is a variation of Foucault’s use of the term, which speaks to it as a representation of an event rather than a strictly linguistic analysis. Foucault (1972) states in *Archaeology of knowledge* that language analysis always asks “according to what rule could other similar statement be made?”, but that discourse “poses a quite different question: how is it that one particular statement appears rather than another?” In essence, Foucauldian discourse centers on systems of thought and practice that construct subjects and the worlds they occupy (Schwandt, 2007).
Furthermore, the performative nature of the works examined and produced by my research require an understanding of the discourse of contexts that question the role of the various attributes that are represented, such as who is involved, when it occurred, and why it happened (Riessman, 2008, p.105).

Because this discourse was in a state of play, which Hans (1981) says is “an experiential mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world” (p.12), the intersection of ideas created a tension that produced meaning for the people who engaged with the research. In this sense it is designed to use the fact that it is a source of interpretive strength, like Foucault’s The archaeology of knowledge (1972) “caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network” (p.23). It is intended to include the meaning produced by participants, but also that produced by readers of this dissertation. As Hans (1981) suggests, this incorporated more than is said or written to include that which has been experienced because “…play of the natural world preceded the play of language and indeed, generated it, so we must assume that there is more to human play than language” (p.16).

The resources I assembled into my practice emphasize thoughts and acts that encourage similar perceptions or interactions, while also accepting that each structure highlights or inhibits perceptions particular to their construction. Within the dissertation these elements are left at play, in continual discourse and are not given primacy over one another.
My decision on this front is reflected in the literature I reference, such as when Freire (1998) says we should consider ideas from multiple perspectives, even those antagonistic to our own, or when John Law states in discussing Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that “Only dead theories and dead practices celebrate their self-identity. Only dead theories and dead practices hang on to their names, insist upon perfect reproduction. Only dead theories and dead practices seek to reflect, in every detail, the practices which came before” (1999, p.10).

In place of those dead theories, I have arranged the contributing ideas into something like what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) term a *multiplicity*, wherein each element is simultaneously a part of a group that shares unifying characteristics and an individual that does not necessarily represent every trait associated with that group.

I have taken those varied techniques and ideologies and structured them into three interrelated networks that borrowed Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) schema for meaningful play: Rules, Play, and Culture⁶, because that schema focuses on the discernable effects of relationships in a system. These networks were both interdependent and transversal, and the lines between them being intentionally left uncertain in order to keep the research focused on the experience itself. The methodological tools spoke to the *rules*, and provides the structure the research proceeded along. In this case that structure is housed in the domain of participatory arts-based inquiry through American freeform.

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⁶ Discussed throughout and developed further in Chapter 2: Literature Review and Chapter 3: Design of Study. This schema was used both to organize the dissertation as a whole and in the design of the games the community of play participated in.
The multi-method approach I constructed incorporates an array of qualitative data (Lichtman, 2013) while the performed nature of the experience allows me to examine the complex relationships between cultures, individuals, and groups (Riessman, 2008) in an embodied, rather than strictly linguistic or academic, experience.

Figure 1: Meaningful play (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) as a structural framework
The epistemology emphasizes the act of making sense of this lived experience, the *play* within the research. These concepts explore connectivity and discourse as dynamic systems which were under a continuous process of co-construction, most especially as represented in Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Finally, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks investigate the discourse of power between individuals and systems, particularly within schools, and the expectations that exist for our community of play, which provides the *culture* in which the research was situated. The culture supplies a context for understanding the participants, the goals of the research, and the social environments to which they are both connected.

**Methodology/Rules: Participatory arts-based inquiry**

My research functions as participatory arts-based inquiry founded on the idea that accessing a de-centralized perspective presents an opportunity for participants to develop empathy for others within the educational communities that they regularly occupied. An arts-based methodology was the most suited to this cause because the arts function "to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene, 1995, p. 28), while the multi-method incorporated multiple forms of qualitative data (Lichtman, 2013) to provide a polyvocal understanding of the knowledge that emerged. The games that we employ function as social artifacts that illustrate the process of reality construction for both individuals and cultures (Riessman, 2008).
Arts-based inquiry can be described as being *on, for, or in* the arts (Borgdoff, 2006), with some overlap existing between those purposes for individual projects. Research *on* art is performed from a theoretical distance, with the art as a subject to be examined and not manipulated, and typically represents a reflective interpretation common to academic approaches to works of art. Research *for* the arts changes the focus on art from being the subject into the objective, and seeks to provide insight that may have a concrete impact on artistic practices. Research *in* the arts describes arts based research that challenges pre-existing notions of what research is by using art as a tool for reflection and expression. Using these parameters my work is best described as being done *in* the arts, *for* art educators, and *on* the relationships they observe within educational communities.

My approach to arts-based inquiry is influenced by arts-based educational research (ABER), research meant to enhance perception of human activities and defined by the presence of art (Barone and Eisner, 1997), and a/r/tography, which "makes use of the multiple roles and contiguous relationships of artists, researchers, and teachers as frames of reference through which art practice is explored as a site for inquiry" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 58). Both of these methods are questioned and strengthened by being put into a discourse with Jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) *Arts-based research: A critique and a proposal*, which suggests that the arts should not be viewed as an object but as an event that is encountered.
The resulting research occupies in a separate space than the methodologies it drew from, a simulacra (Deleuze, 1990) pursuing its own course, it never the less exists in a relationship with them and shares their focus on experience, liminality, and interconnectedness. As the media through which my research was performed, American freeform places those ideas into a collaborative framework that could be experienced, as well as described and interpreted.

**ABER.** ABER’s strength is in raising questions and problematizing situations perceived as “givens” than for providing answers the way traditional (quantitative) research does. This is both because works of art present knowledge as an empathic experience, rather than a literal form (Eisner, 2008), and because a method of inquiry inevitably helps determine the questions we might ask as a part of our research (Saks, 1996). Furthermore ABER’s focus on experience as the basis for compiling patterns of evidence makes the meaning of the resulting data more vivid, and more comprehensible (Sullivan, 2010). The point of using ABER is not enjoyment on the part of the artist or audience, nor exactness of message, but to express, examine, or begin to understand a form of knowledge that simultaneously engages individual contexts and communal interactions and discourse.

**A/r/tography.** A/r/tography and ABER have similar goals and methods, but a/r/tography focuses on making use of their practitioner’s frames of reference as an artist, researcher, and teacher in order to utilize art both as practice and as a site of inquiry (Sullivan, 2010).
Founded on postmodern understandings of the interconnected relationships between peoples, things, time, and space, a/r/tography blurs distinctions between classifications taken at face value, notably those between art, research, and education, but also between factors such as artist and audience, separate points of time, and purpose of particular spaces. The role of the artist/researcher/teacher within this context is not to answer questions, but to problematize understandings and shift the way participants engage with the world around them (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2008). For the purposes of my research a/r/tography emphasizes three concepts that are particularly important: liminality, interconnectedness⁷, and communities of inquiry.

**Liminality.** The term “liminality” relates to how objects and ideas may be connected to several different contexts simultaneously within a “liminal space”, which serves to create a multiplex identity. Liminal spaces are dynamic “in-between” areas for making meaning that include “plural views, ambiguous notions, and uncertain outcomes” (Sullivan, 2010, p.40) to disrupt assumptions and create opportunities for achieving a new perspective. A/r/tographers work from the premise that utilizing multiple lenses is more than just a matter of how their various contexts relate to a given point of inquiry, but also how the interaction within that liminal space continuously evolves and creates meaning (Springgay, 2008).

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⁷ Both liminality and interconnectedness are concepts that are an important part of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which serves an epistemological purpose in this research and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapter 3: Design of Study.
**Interconnectedness.** This inter-subjective stance allows for "shared symbolically-mediated meanings" (Parsons, 1995) that assist individual and communal understandings, and has been suggested to exist not within an individual form (such as a person, place, or object) but within the network of discourse that surrounds it (Crossley, 1996).

A/r/toography foregrounds this network of discourse in the concept of the rhizome, an element of connection described as having “no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze & Guatteri, 1980). The rhizome is the interplay between what is potential and what is actual (Lester, 2013) and represents the interconnectedness between all facets (perceivable and non-perceivable) of an experience that come to play at any given moment.

**Communities of practice.** The final element of a/r/toography that was most relevant to my work are the communities of practice a/r/toographers sometimes form. These communities are a “site for weaving the personal and societal aspects of our lives together, helping us make sense of our lives and the lives of others” (Irwin, 2004, p.80), and are based on communal dedication to four commitments; to a way of being in the world (as a/r/toographers); to inquiry; to negotiating personal engagement within a community of belonging; and to creating practices that trouble and address difference. Members work to establish an atmosphere of trust that values polyvocal experiences and discourse and use the process of artmaking as a tool for meaning making, which enhances that community's capacity for collaboration, new creative arts practices, critical social analysis, and commitment to participate in the research (Barndt, 2008).
Because communities can come to be seen as authorities that turn their members into subjects and objects (Foucault, 1984), the discourse of power having naturally created multiple connections that are susceptible to incorporation into pre-existing structures (Foucault, 1980), there is one further commitment that should be adapted. I call it a commitment to humanization, an idea I drew from Greene’s (2001) writings, and which dictates that we should “try to engage persons as imagining, thinking, feeling, perceiving, active beings, realizing that the more they know, the more they are likely to see and hear” (p.56).

jagodinski & Wallin. jagodinski & Wallin’s (2013) critique of arts-based research must be understood not as a repudiation of arts-based methodologies, but rather as a challenge to common assumptions the authors observed researchers making within those methodologies. It is meant with both “love and respect” (p.2) for the researchers who have used them, though they frame that love as an ethical act of “betrayal”. Principally, this involves conceiving of art not as a “thing” or an object, but as an event that is “a transversal transformative act that escapes productionist logic of modern power that designer capitalism puts into play” (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p. 3). Such a piece cannot be conceived of in a strictly productive sense because it focuses on experiences that exist without a prior reference and prioritizes the act of doing rather than representation or communication.
In addition to the counterpoints to a/r/tography and ABER, jagodinski and Wallin also introduce a new way of thinking about the act of creation; the symbiosis of *aesthesis*, *praxis*, and *poeisis*\(^8\). Generally speaking, this is an understanding that suggests the acts of sensing, making, and doing art are all intertwined into a complex, and ultimately subjective, artistic event. Most arts-based research focuses on praxis as it appears to be the easiest to comprehend and explain, but doing so limits what can be discovered through the encounter and offers only limited tools for engaging in experiences. This understanding fed both the conception of how American freeform would function as a tool for artistic inquiry, as a space that invited uncertainty and which focused on the lived experience, and how the results of that inquiry would be represented in multiple forms\(^9\).

**American freeform and art.** The role of imagination in changing the world, of visualizing what *might* be but *is not*, is generally underestimated. This is unfortunate if you agree with Greene (1995) that "... imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (p.3). Her conceit of social imagination is that we have the capacity to envision the world we would choose to have, and that this act enables us to observe and acknowledge the weaknesses of our present situation. American freeform, as an interactive social art form (Montola, 2008) that draws on imagination and empathy in constructing experiences, presents the ideal media to enable the empathic reaching necessary to close gaps between members of an educational community.

\(^8\) Aesthesis, praxis, and poeisis are described in greater detail in the Methodology section of Chapter 3: Design of Study.

\(^9\) The process is described in detail in Chapter 3: Methodology and visible in Chapter 4: Data.
American freeform presents a number of affordances for application in participatory arts-based inquiry; the effect of having had an embodied experience; the space it make for the exploration of identity, ideas, and emotions; and the role of a community of play in the act of collaborative world-building. These concepts are interrelated though they can also be considered as individual facets of a role-played experience.

The assumption that role-playing can be an art form has met some resistance but has also had champions (Harviainen, 2014), who believe that the dismissal of the form is housed in outdated prejudices. The cognitive and emotional spaces many games thematically focus on (Stark, 2012) fit the dictionary definition (Merriam-Webster, 2015) of art as “something that is created with imagination and skill and that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings”. These experiences also meet artist-researcher Patricia Leavy’s (2009) description of the purpose of arts-based research: “to describe, explore, or discover” (p.21). Larps have been recognized by artistic institutions, such as the presentation of Brody Condon’s *Level Five* (Krasinski, 2010) at the Hammer museum in 2010 or the Rhizome Grant he received in 2008 to create *SonsbeekLive: The Twentyfivefold Manifestation* (Newitz, 2008).

Larps and American freeform games are “not only performed, but created and experienced first-hand” (Stenros, 2010, p.20), providing a liminal participant/audience view called the “first-person audience” (Sandberg, 2004). The embodied aspect of American freeform games also makes bonding experiences more accessible and connects the experience to a communal location and event (Stringer, 2014).
This shifted point of view embodies Eisner’s (2008) claim that “experiencing a situation in a form that allows you to walk in the shoes of another is to know one aspect of it” (p.6), as well as Sullivan’s (2010) statement that "as contexts change, meanings change" (p.32). However, entering another's vantage point doesn’t mean that you agree with or necessarily value it, but that a practitioner is attempting to reach an understanding of another point of view as a “human possibility” (Greene 1995, p. 4).

If imagination “permits us to give credence to alternative realities" (Greene, 1995, p.3), then it follows that embodied knowing through role-playing can provide a framework for using experiences to explore complex ideas, especially that of identity. The overlap between a player’s context and emotions with that of a character, referred to as “bleed” (Vi åker jeep, 2007) in larps, results in a blurring of personal and imagined realities that allow a gaming experience and a player’s quotidian existence to affect one another. Bleed can be utilized in exploring how relational systems can work, developing an understanding of self, and establishing an empathic linkage to experiences that are not readily accessible to participants.

As a polyvocal experience that is housed in both individual and communal perceptions, an American freeform game includes negotiation of social understandings in the pursuit of collaborative world making. Some sort of struggle is expected and often encouraged between the characters in the game to enhance excitement, but the media functions most effectively in an atmosphere of safety and trust.
Players are encouraged to examine the relationships between the characters together, and are rewarded for striving to make them work within the framework of the game because their interactions determine the course of a game and the direction of any personal or communal meaning-making that is to be had. A large part of where that meaning is made is in the debriefing session in which players begin to make sense of their emotions, transition from the game back to “real life”, and potential problems between players are addressed (Stark, 2014). Since every game reflects the unique players and contexts involved, the debrief\textsuperscript{10} is a time not just for making personal meaning but to get to know what other people thought and felt and to work collaboratively to describe the impact on each individual.

**Epistemology/Play: Actor-Network Theory (ANT)**

*Webs of relationships.* Actor-Network Theory (ANT) functions in my research as a tool to understand and represent the multifaceted discourse between the networks encountered in my work. ANT can be described as a set of “tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located. It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations” (Law, 2007, p. 595). The constructions focused on how these relationships, and the tensions that existed between them, produced what was perceived of as “reality” (Foucault, 1984).

\textsuperscript{10} Within the tradition of larp and freeform roleplay the term “debrief” functions as a noun that describes the debriefing session at the end of the game.
As Deleuze & Guattari (1987) suggest, this reality was itself a multiplicity that incorporated connections from "a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)” (p.23) into its being.

ANT is notable for its tendency to resist givens and categories in favor of the concept of complex webs of interaction that are necessarily subjective in nature, and because it does not privilege humans over objects or environments in its examination of those interrelations (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010). Individual expressions of those elements are expressed as *actors*, which exist in an inter-objective *network* that they both affect and are affected by (Latour, 1999). ANT also employs semiotics in order to understand differences and divisions as *effects or outcomes* of relationships, rather than as given traits, and insists that relationships and being are performative in nature (Law, 1999). The result is a theory of fluidity and circulation that references reality, social spheres, and narrative (Latour, 1999) that focuses on relationships between a multiplicity of perspectives (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010) to illustrate connections and uncertainty.

**ANT as epistemology.** I adapted ANT as an epistemological tool, rather than its regular methodological role. ANT as a methodological tool describes the actual world around us, and the constructed nature of the community of play in my research meant that such an application could only describe the actions our community undertook rather than the various potentialities and actualities that sprung from those actions. It is focused on the reality of what *is*, rather than an anticipation of what *may one day be*, which would limit the applications for my methods as described in answer to the previous questions.
However, the rhizomatic perspective of ANT, (Latour, 1999) in connection with its understanding of the materiality of existence, is useful in thinking about how communities exist as actors within networks. Furthermore, I kept in mind Latour’s (1999) suggestion that ANT could be compared to a perspective drawing, illusory but descriptive (p.21), and in that sense it is also useful in my analysis of the themes and codes that arose during the research, as well as the imagery I employ in the creation of maps of diegetic relationships.

This approach was acceptable because ANT, much like the assemblages it examines, exists in a permanent state of becoming wherein its ideas are meant as a tool for understanding, not as a totalizing theory of the world (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012). If ANT’s notion that actors are not confined to humanity and that ideas and experiences contribute to an assemblage as nodes of inter-objectivity are accepted, then it must also be accepted that the perimeters of a community or a field of play are not defined solely by the individual contributions of the people who are involved. The identity of ANT itself is meant to be dynamic and dependent upon the intent and application of its practitioners and adherents. As John Law (1999) states: “Only dead theories and dead practices celebrate their self-identity. Only dead theories and dead practices hang on to their names, insist upon perfect reproduction. Only dead theories and dead practices seek to reflect, in every detail, the practices which came before” (p.10).
**ANT and education.** Previous research that has used ANT to examine questions similar to those of this research present some interesting observations. Firstly, that learning is not as constrained as it tends to be thought of, and that it exists as an effect of relational interactions "that may be messy and incoherent, and spread across time and space" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, p.xviii). Whereas schools are often seen as aligning with what Freire (1998) critically describes as “the banking model”, a dichotomous construct that casts individuals as spectators and consumers of a product, ANT emphasizes a more Foucauldian conception that resists reductionism and encourages a perception of multilayered interrelation (Deleuze,1986). Within an educational community the points of intersection for learning, such as subject-specific classes, school assemblies, or field trips, are easy to perceive and examine because people and things have been placed into trajectories that foster particular “meanings, identities, and lines of action” (J. Nespor, cited in Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p.54).

**Conceptual Framework**

**Foucault, Greene, and Freire.** The assumptions and understandings that support my research are tied to perceptions and relationships from the educational world, and the possibilities that exist within that world. The lens through which it is focused and constructed is a combination of Foucault’s (1984) description of the performative nature of autonomy and incorporation, educator Maxine Greene’s (1995) description of how art and social imagination function as tools for meaning-making in the pursuit of education, and philosopher Paulo Freire’s (2005) empowerment through critical pedagogy.
These philosophers and educators are renowned for their work within social justice and their claims about the nature of perception, educational communities, and theories of possibility underpin my ideas and efforts.

Because I highlight perceived experience as a tool for empathy and understanding, the nature of perception and reality is moved to the forefront of this discussion. Freire (1998) says that reality is really a continuous process of transformation, and that how we perceive this reality and our place in it affects the forms our actions take. If a person believes they can make no difference to a situation or that they are isolated from others it constrains those actions to having only the most minimal impact on their world. Overcoming that mindset can be difficult because a person “always has to confront a certain weight in lived situations, if only the weight of memory and the past” (Greene, 1988, p.9). However, the person doing the perceiving is also undergoing a continuous transformation as a dynamic being, one who is perpetually emergent and capable of assuming multiple perceptions as they reach out and interact with other actors in their world (Greene, 1988). Foucault describes this as an active process, an effect that must be worked upon oneself as a gateway to whatever “truths” that may exist (Tanke, 2009).

Educators, who assume their professional role in the act of engaging in it and through their reflection upon their practice (Freire, 1998), are heavily affected by this intersection of perception and action.
However, educational communities obstruct or obscure the potential for development of that relationship, partially because of the focus on predetermined goals that are not always in the best interests of students and teachers (Greene, 1995), but primarily in the manner that teachers and administrators come to see themselves: as providing a commodity in a system they cannot affect (Greene, 1988). When members of the educational community see themselves as dehumanized objects meant only to regulate, process, or to be processed, their threshold for perceiving possibilities is greatly limited. The key to superseding this state begins with the recognition of the essential humanity of other members in a community and in the pursuit of an understanding of how each member’s life is intertwined with the rest of the community, rather than separating each member into a “case”. As a case, a person is simultaneously an object to be studied and an extension of what can be considered knowledge (Foucault, 1995, p.191). This makes things appear simpler numerically, as each case can be graded, ranked, and placed into an isolated space. In this sense the person is only the sum of particular set of categories (Foucault, 1984), an object to be analyzed and assessed.

This premise requires an understanding of the dynamic nature of communities and how that nature makes space for imagining a “sense of possibility” (Greene, 1995, p.38). Utilizing this space for a society is an ethical responsibility because those communities "are in the process of being what we make of them in history, as a possibility” (Freire, 1998, p. 267), one that includes a polyvocal understanding of viewpoints different from the educator's own, and occasionally antagonistic to it (Freire, 1998).
In this space normalization and homogeneity are not seen as unifying forces but as agents of division and alienation (Foucault, 1984), and awareness of this fact is what allows members to resist those states (Greene, 1995). The creation of such a community cannot be forced, but requires a shared space for mutual discovery of one another and a recognition of common values (Greene, 1995). What is called for then is a community of education striving to share and use their perceptions of the world to provoke personal and communal insight.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Community networks.** The intersection of the conceptual framework with the epistemological constructs I used suggested to me a concept of communities as interconnected and overlapping contextual networks built around concepts of individual and shared identities, but that are reliant on differences in the determination of their capabilities. This conception is supported by several additional concepts that describe what a community is and how it functions.

At the foundation is Daniel’s (cited in Daniel, Stuhr, & Ballengee-Morris, 2006) definition of communities as “(A) collection of people who are unified by locality (or not), similar circumstances and/or history, shared interests, and/or spiritual linkages” (p.2-3). Daniel, Stuhr, and Ballengee-Morris found that assuming this standpoint and asking students to question and explore what a community is developed awareness of roles and responsibilities.
They also found making ideas of “school” and “community” interconnected rather than exclusive allowed for the creation of a nurturing, relevant learning environment in which students were able to actively make connections between subjects.

Foucault’s (1977) descriptions of the interplay of identity, authority, and context within a community, suggest that awareness of the role one plays in a community is not just empowering as a developmental tool, but as a key element of assuming an identity and resisting the sub-summation of will to that of an institution. If the act of ceding one’s will is a self-transformative act of objectification (Foucault, 1984), then there exists a tension between unity and individuality in that each member of a community is simultaneously an autonomous being, constituted by a distinct set of relationships, while also affecting and being affected by a collective whole. This tension, while apparently a dialectical fusion of opposite poles, is actually a mediated relationship that is just as dynamic as any other (Greene, 1988). Deleuze & Guattari (1987) say that this tension is actually critical to understanding existence, and state that a "becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity" (p239).

Because of this dual-existence an individual develops their own understanding of what that community stands for, their own “pack unconscious” (p.35), which are sometimes wildly divergent from one another.

Participating in the intercommunication of members within that community, being willing to engage in the messy discourse that results from such differences, is an act of faith and trust that makes a community possible (Freire, 2005).
In this sense, the strength of a community is not solely determined by the points of commonality around which they rally, but by the differences between the members and a community’s willingness to embrace those differences as elements of its own being. It is those differences that describe the borders of the community, and it is in the examination of those borders through discourse that Greene (1981) says possibilities appear and "the "common" itself becomes multiplex and endlessly challenging, as each person reaches out from his/her own ground toward what might be, should be, is not yet" (p. 21).

**Communities of play.** The particular community in which this research operates is one I termed a *community of play*. The community fosters experiences that allow us to collaboratively explore and push against personal and communal boundaries, which often remained unseen unless they are actively disrupted. Members in the community of play share a thematic field of play (Hans, 1981), a community as defined above but one in which roles are fluid and members intentionally assume many different stances within that field. This fluidity invites disturbance, and with that disturbance an understanding (to some degree) of alternative viewpoints that are incorporated into the experience of each member. This requires openness and commitment on the part of the members, as well as an understanding that in such an assemblage "frustration is inevitable, for one cannot choose one's moment" (Hans, 1987, p.24).

Being a part of a community of play functions as a catalyst for the community as a whole, a disruption of what would have been possible without that presence, even while it likewise ruptures the path a person takes by challenging assumptions in their thinking and in their actions.
In American freeform games performed by the community, collaborative agency and experience become intertwined in a visualization of a world that is not real, but which does matter because of the way it responds to preconceptions and notions of what it is like to be other than we are. It is through such observations that it becomes possible to glimpse points of connection, and to test the boundaries of individuals and their contexts.

**Design of Study**

**General description**

This study called for four to ten participants who were either professional or pre-service art educators to play in a series of four American freeform games in order to weave a shared understanding of relationships in an educational community. In doing so there is an element of resisting the power of the status quo, but given Foucault’s point that power is a relationship and not a state that can be assumed, possessed, or preserved (Deleuze, 1986), it more particularly focuses on examining the nature of that relationship with the goal of transforming it into one that can more aptly meet the needs of the participants. The inclusion of professional art educators incorporates a lived experience of encountering how power operated in a school on a daily basis, while pre-service teachers offer an “outsider” point of view that destabilizes a uniform presentation of such communities. The common interest participants share in art and art education provides initial points of connection to engender trust, and over time the multiple realities of the participants (Greene, 1988) are woven into a field of play constructed from their communal experiences.
Those shared experiences allow them to "mediate between the object-world and their own consciousness" (Greene, 1988, p. 122), while the game-based platform allows them to see their educational experiences while “standing at a distance” (Freire, 1998, p.153), which brake with everyday routines and grants new perspectives to incorporate into reflections on their pasts and visualizations of possible futures.

During the research, participants collaboratively create an imaginary school and several character roles that they assume within that context. Prior to the first session players were given access to Play with intent (Boss & Holter, 2012) and the Pocket guide to American freeform (Stark, 2014) so that they had a better expectation of what the experience would be like as well as additional familiarity with the techniques employed. At the conclusion of the research, all participants were given a letter of participation that described the experience and notes the dates they attended.

The participants

My position as a student teacher supervisor meant that I had access to a number of professional art educators in the Columbus area, either through prior contact or through contact with the teaching and licensure program at The Ohio State University, as well as the pre-service educators who were nearing the end of their time in the program. To avoid bias, none of the students whom I supervised were allowed to participate. An informational flyer was widely distributed via email, and recipients were asked to pass it on to others they thought might want to participate (the “snowball” method). Participants took part in individual semi-structured entrance and exit interviews, based around the research puzzles, which I recorded and transcribed.
The participants knew they would be engaging in role-playing and discourse, and that each session would also be video recorded for later transcription and reference.

The creation of the community of play involved developing trust and negotiations of role between the members of that community, because as Bernard De Koven (1978) states "The safer we feel in the game we're playing, the more willing we are to play it." (p. 17). Participants used the sessions in which we met as a space to explore alternate roles, experiment with new techniques, and consider points of conflict from their professional lives. No person was required to share more than they were comfortable with and participation was always voluntary, parameters necessary to achieve a state of play (DeKoven, 1978) and to create the trust a working community of inquiry (Stringer, 2014) needs to function. There periods of reflection from a participant’s point of view and that of the roles they adopted documents the development of both the community of play and the imaginary context that serves as the framework for communal experiences.

**Game design**

My research design incorporates the results of pilot studies I had conducted with the principles and techniques drawn from *Play with intent* (Boss & Holter, 2012) and the *Pocket guide to American freeform* (Stark, 2014). *Play with intent* was created to serve more as a series of principles and techniques than a game, the idea being that it could adapt to whatever a community of play feels like doing on a given night, and it outlines several jobs that the authors feel are integral to the facilitation of a game with the idea that participants take turns assuming those responsibilities.
The *Pocket guide to American freeform* represents Stark’s attempt to begin a formal description of an “emerging style of game design” and includes a short history, safety precautions, and suggestions for game designers. In both texts the emphasis is on working within a community of play, which means respecting the emotional needs and concerns of all players as well as working together to craft memorable experiences.

American freeform games commonly include three sections: a workshop that explained pertinent techniques and establishes an atmosphere of trust, a period of “in-character” play in which the experiences were created, and a debriefing session that helped wrap up loose ends, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and assist the players in making meaning together (Stark, 2014). I added an additional reflective period before the game for discussing player-created artifacts and reflections that occurred between sessions, which I referred to as the pre-brief. The creation of artifacts outside of the game allowed the players to develop a richer experience for the community of play and offered an additional avenue for players to “get into the head” of characters. These artifacts were documented and shared with the community of play, though players retained all physical artifacts and could have refused to allow that documentation if they desired.

It is a tenet of American freeform that the act of including a workshop at the beginning of a session was essential for establishing expectations and creating a safe space in which play could occur.
In addition to laying out rules for particular meta-techniques, it allows players to be aware of thematic components and presents a non-judgmental opportunity for them to opt out of playing, creates shared experiences that make players feel like part of a group, and establishes a uniform understanding of physical boundaries. It is stated during the workshop that play will stop at a given point to include a debriefing session in order to make a statement that the feelings and experiences generated during play had value (Nittner, 2014).

Discussion during the debrief and pre-brief is where most perceptible meaning-making occurs because "only when individuals are empowered to interpret the situations they live together do they become able to mediate between the object-world and their own consciousness" (Greene, 1988). The experiences the community shares can be placed into a “dynamic organization” (Dewey, 1934) that encourages growth, the stages of which (inception, development, and fulfillment) call upon different faculties. This means that during reflection an experience can be simultaneously an aesthetic experience, an opportunity for growth, and the primary vehicle through which we affect and are affected by the world. Such an experience recognizes that reflexivity destabilizes a static notion of identity, in that the process represents a change in that identity.

**Sessions of play.**

Due to my emphasis on safety, the first meta-techniques I reviewed with players were the safe-words “brake” and “cut”. To “brake” means to ask a player to lower the intensity of a scene and to cut means ending the scene immediately, with no questions asked.
They were also introduced to the “internal monologue” technique, wherein a character voices their inner thoughts out loud as a whisper. This reinforces themes of transparency within the game as it is the players, and not the characters, who gain insight into the narrative.

We used my game What to do about Michael? as the basis for the experience, because the setting (a teacher meeting about a student) was familiar to the participants and because it allowed them to jump directly into developing the characters and context they would use for the research. The game was slightly modified, so that more attention is paid to the collaborative creation of the school. This is achieved by going round-robin and asking each player for additional details, which are written on a prominent display surface, until everyone has contributed. Additionally, relationships between characters are established after identity creation using the “ball of yarn” technique (Nilsen & Lindahl, 2013). In this technique the first player holds the loose end of a ball of yarn and throws it to another player while calling out some sort of relationship (e.g. “I’m jealous of how popular you are with students” or “I am secretly attracted to you”). The person who caught the ball could further define that relationship (e.g. “I don’t think you take me seriously” or “I trust you like a sibling”) before throwing it to somebody who has not yet had the ball while defining their relationship with that character. The reflections in the debrief are allowed to be an opportunity to critique the affordances of the game and define what players would most like to pursue or avoid in future games.
The second session introduced the “internal monologue” technique, wherein a character voices their inner thoughts out loud. This reinforces themes of transparency within the game as it is the players, and not the characters, who gain insight into the narrative. From this session on players could suggest experimentation with other meta-techniques they encounter, and we would collectively decide which ones would be of most use for the longer period of play. Players also create a student and a parent or guardian of a student in the second session to add to the imagined community, however decisions about which interactions to examine were determined through discourse at this point rather than being solely my own decision. Because of the nature of this research, the setting in these games was expected to be points of interaction and impact between different individuals or groups of individuals (such as on a field trip, at a parent-teacher meeting, or a lunchroom get-together with colleagues.) However it is important to note that mimesis was not the primary goal of play, and that meta-techniques could be used to make a narrative appear unstable (such as how a single event might appear to emphasize different qualities from several different points of view.) The final session’s debrief included not just a reflection of play for that session, but of the experience as a whole.

Data.

The multi-method approach (Lichtman, 2013) renders numerous forms of data for interpretation. The sessions themselves are a source for narrative inquiry (Schwandt, 2007) in that the life experiences that are generated and explored are directly tied to the context of the participants.
The discourse analysis (Lichtman, 2013) I apply to the reflections of participants help further define this context, and establish where the community is situated as play progresses. The community also collectively employs visual analysis (Riessman, 2008) on the artifacts they create as a tool for discourse and reflection on the themes and narratives they generate.

I used the data I collected each session to create a series of in-vivo codes (Givens, 2008). These codes are framed around my research puzzles and represent the participant’s words and actions as closely as possible in order to connect the data with the lived experience of the research. The codes also support my creation of the rhizomatic maps, which visualize the community of play’s constructed and actual realities. Codes and maps are both subject to member checks (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) as they were developed and revised in order to assure accuracy and aid in the determination of the direction of the research as it progressed.

**Significance**

The primary beneficiaries of my research are, first and foremost, the participants themselves. The act of engaging in American freeform as art enables them to see themselves in Foucault’s “broken mirror” (Tanke, 2009), a distortion of their own image that is nevertheless recognizable and which suggests the possibilities of what may yet be. The creative world-building participants engage in allows participants to “reach beyond, to reach-not toward the predictable, but towards the possible” (Greene, 2001, p.163), to observe, enact, and explore educational experiences both familiar and strange.
The knowledge gained from that experience is the direct result of their "invention and re-invention" of the field of play through the inquiry and discourse they pursue “in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 2005, p. 72). The research also grants participants access to a set of techniques for them to employ with colleagues and students, which could extend this experience into a broader communal sphere.

A second beneficiary to my work is the field of arts-education research, specifically arts-based inquiry, which likewise benefits by the introduction of a new set of techniques. The use of role-playing as a media for arts-based inquiry has not yet been explored in game theory (Stenros, 2010) or in arts education to any great degree, and as Highmore (2002) says “The necessity of fashioning new forms (or tools) for apprehending new kinds of experiences (new- ‘realities’) might be seen as the general impetus and problematic attendant on theorizing daily life” (p.23). My research represents one of those forms in that it presents a way of examining and expressing beliefs, one that incorporates a de-centered identity and emphasizes an understanding of how a community can be inter-subjective. The dynamic virtual realm of the experiences provides a safe space for communication and reflection, enables personal and communal introspection, and allows participants to help determine the form of that experience, which provides a sense of ownership to the knowledge that is generated.

American freeform has particular significance as a media in that it relies on communal acts and contains the inherent uncertainty of collaborative play. While it is not uncommon to hear descriptions of artist’s work as “playful”, the majority of the time an audience is relegated to either spectators of play or subjects being manipulated.
Neither of these concepts feels particularly true to the concept of play or the possibilities it presents artistically. This research illustrates the idea that art can draw from play an embrace of uncertainty by accepting a mutable existence that is determined in the uncomfortable place between order and chaos that rhizomatic lines fly through.

**Limitations**

Several limitations are accepted as inherent in the utilization of American freeform for participatory arts-based inquiry: the limits of the media (in this case the games) in effecting change, the acknowledgement that any simulated experience couldn’t convey a “true” understanding of a daily lived experience, and the ambiguity of expectations that results from relying on unknown factors (notably the input of participants in the direction of the experience.) The experiences grows from the understandings the participants brought with them, and therefore should not be seen as an end, but as a starting point for further exploration. For the media to work as intended and for the experience to have any impact, players are expected to seek, support, and reflect on change outside of the context of the game.

Because the games themselves hold an unpredictable and ephemeral quality that may take place in several spaces at once they were difficult to fully document. Though the debriefing and player created artifacts gave a sense of play, the actual experience can only be described after the fact. This is due to the form of knowledge the experience represents, which is lived rather than described. However, an a posteriori description was also where communal meaning making is most likely to occur, and in that sense it is more likely to effectively achieve the goals of this research.
Conclusion

Within these bounds I arranged my research into six chapters. This first chapter provides an overview, and summarizes the context, goals, puzzles, significance, and limitations of my research. Chapter two locates conceptual and technical connections between related literature and my research, and develops an understanding of how empathy, communities of play, and arts-based inquiry are interrelated. My theoretical framework and methodology are further developed in chapter three, wherein the epistemological, methodological, and media-based tools of inquiry and analysis are explained. Chapter four relates the experience of the research, and includes quotes and artifacts that illustrate the development of both the collaborative diegetic reality and the community of play. This information fed the results and findings that I present in chapter five, which in turn developed into the recommendations and conclusions in chapter six.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter I review the concepts and literature that describe the role that culture\textsuperscript{11} plays in my dissertation. This speaks to two intertwined cultures in fact, as it includes both the key components for understanding the culture of educational communities and the manner in which I apply them to construct a community of play.

First I discuss the nature of transformative nature of empathy, the experiences and relationships of educational communities, and the need for the development of empathic practice within such communities. Foucault’s (1984) description of relationships between individuals, authorities, and organizations establishes an understanding of the mechanics that undergirds interactions in an educational community, Freire’s (2005) application of empowerment through critical pedagogy provides the tools needed to alter the nature of that discourse, and Greene’s (1995) use of social imagination as a tool for reconceptualization gives an idea of what to aim for. These ideas are situated in an understanding of how sympathy and empathy function in caring-practice institutions, particularly educational communities.

\textsuperscript{11} This refers again to Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) schema for meaningful play, culture provided a context for understanding. See figure 1 in Chapter 1: Introduction.
Second, I describe how philosophical constructs about play support the creation of communities of play, and highlight examples of communities of play within contemporary arts practice. This section makes particular use of writings from multiple philosophers associated with the concept of play, most especially: Nietzsche (1927), as the forerunner of most discussions of play establishes the tension of existence and between the Apolline and Dionysian aesthetics; Deleuze, & Guattari (1987) develop their understanding of this tension to consider the intersection of different ideas, actions, and experiences; and Hans (1981) focuses the ideas of his forebears into the concept of applying play as a method of applying fluid thought in the confirmation or denial of experience. These concepts intersect with game studies to describe how games, specifically American freeform role-playing games, function as a social art form for creating meaning.

**The discourse of power**

Michel Foucault’s work, especially *The means of correct training* from *Discipline and punish* (1977), and accounts of his life from Miller’s *The passion of Michel Foucault* (1993) served as the basis for my game *What to do about Michael?* (Cox, 2014). The game was initially constructed to provide a lived experience of Foucault’s ideas in a role-played teacher meeting about a troubled student, and was expanded to provide the framework that was used in the research with my community of play.
Because of this many of Foucault’s ideas about how the discourse of power functions, and about the nature of the relationships between individuals and authorities, were clearly evident in the experiences we role-played. Furthermore the subject of the game, the relationships between different members of educational communities, demanded that attention be paid to what Foucault tells us about how relationships function whenever systems of authority and humanity intersect.

Foucault’s work extends into multiple arenas, from mental health to penal systems, but always speaks to the interrelated nature of how we see the world and how that world functions, with particular attention paid to the discourse of power. The thoughts and actions that emerge from that discourse result in the co-construction of the subjects and objects within the system as well as the system itself (Schwandt, 2007). Within this system power constantly circulates through the members of the network and their multiple relationships even while those members themselves experience and exercise its effects. This circulation of power leads to one of Foucault’s (1980) most important points, that individuals are “the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p.98). This is not to say that domination does not exist between the members of the society, rather that this domination appears in multiple forms and that its interplay ultimately produces whatever a society comes to think of as its “truths” (Foucault, 1980).

In interviews he gave regarding the ongoing revelations he encountered in his own work, Foucault (1980) hypothesized that relationships with power are interwoven with other relationships (production, kinship, family, sexuality), that simultaneously play a “conditioning and conditional” role (p142).
The way power is exercised within these relationships is expressed through both the exercise and the resistance of power, both of which are required for the relationship of power to exist. By this he did not mean that this establishes a system of “dominators” and the “dominated”, but instead the discourse of power traveled through and created multiple connections that were (at least partially) susceptible to incorporation by the society as a whole (Foucault, 1980, p.142). In considering these relationships and the way members of the society exert control on one another it is important to recognize that Foucault felt that it is through these exertions that our identity was created, and that furthermore members of a community are willing agents of the authoritative structure of which they are subjects (Hacking, 1986).

When looking at institutions like schools, we begin to see what Foucault (1980) described as the “real agents” of that authority, the families, parents, and authorities that “have begun to become economically advantageous and politically useful” (p.100-101). A large portion of that use in educational communities comes from how such institutions employ discipline in order to use educational space “like a learning machine, but also a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding” (Foucault, 1995, p.147). Within this machine time, activities, and people are divided up and isolated in a manner that can be analyzed, quantified, and capitalized upon. In Discipline and punish (1995) Foucault describes how documentation and the ascribing of traits and different measurements of ability through examination increases individuality, and in that sense creates an identity as a “subject” of the examination.
This individual is isolated from a community for the examination, which institutes an insidious form of control over them as they are now present as a case “which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power” (Foucault, 1995, p.191). Each case can be graded and ranked, a process that places the individual into a distribution based on the expectations that exist for them and also functions as a reward or punishment for their ability to perform their role as an agent of that system.

According to Foucault (1995) this discourse of power is not strictly speaking negative, and must be understood as a thing that produces reality. The identity of the individual, the knowledge that they gain through their relationships in this network, and whatever truths define their reality is produced through this intercommunication. The negative perceptions that are normally associated with this discourse are either the result of the association with the authoritative structures as a “sovereign” that exists on a different plane than that which is “normal”, which Foucault (1980) says is often not the case in Western society (p.108), or that they represent an oppressive regime that occludes truth, and which therefore must be escaped. This is problematic because according to Foucault (1980) truth is something produced through the discourse of power, a thing that is “produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint” and which determines “the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements” (p.131). Furthermore, Foucault (1980) maintains that any system of relationships contains a discourse of power, and that therefore “there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to gambol in” (p.141).
However, Foucault (1980) also tell us that the pervasiveness of the discourse of power and its role in determining truth and knowledge don’t necessarily mean the acceptance of “an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law” (p.141).

The key to altering this discourse begins through recognition of its existence and effects, and an examination and alteration of the gaps found in those effects. It may be as Foucault (1972) argues that any examination of thought always questions “what was being said in what was said?” (p.27-28), but to understand what was being said we have to try and understand why it was being said. This question is situated in contexts and perceptions that are intertwined with the tangle of lives that meet in discourse, and as such it requires a shift in perception away from an isolated perspective to achieve any sort of real understanding.

According to Nietzsche (1977) the development of this perception begins on the surface: we imitate what we see to try and reflect the interior workings of others (p.156-157) and to create understanding through common experience. My work fosters the development of empathy to penetrate further than this network of signs, which can never truly signifies the processes beneath (Foucault, 1970). This is a process of “humanization” (Freire, 2005, p.103), a resistance to systems that reduce people to things, which emerges through the shared “restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 2005, p. 72). It is done by reaching across the differences towards the unknown and asking ourselves “what would it be like?”
Empathy as transformative tool

Empathy and community

In one of her essays from *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change* (1995), Maxine Greene describes how empathy is developed through the active attempt to bridge the gap between what we consider to be “self” and “other” (Greene, 1995), and how this development has a transformative effect for those engaged in the relationship. Not just power exists in that tension then, but a question of closeness and distance that is experienced by the people involved. Understanding the process by which this occurs is complicated by the fact that while we may know empathy when we see it (or more to the point feel it), defining the exact nature of empathy and the purpose it may play is hard to pin down. This is because it falls into the subjective area of intuition, emotions, and the intangible connections we form around them. At the same time it is generally recognized that empathy is a valuable part of our existence, and that it plays an integral role in caring-practice professions such as educators (Freire, 1998). Indeed, for Greene (2001) empathy is the key ingredient for envisioning a sense of possibility, for the ability to conceive of a different world and an idea of how to work towards that vision.
At its most basic empathy is the ability to care for others and to allow others to care for oneself, an ability that allows things to “matter” for us. To be empathetic has several further attributes: it requires trust; is socially situated and related to particular people, situations, and times (Benner & Gordon, 1996); and necessitates the ability to de-center one’s viewpoint to encompass what may be important, fair, or just to another, even while being aware of one’s own motivations and attitudes (Blizek, 1999). It is an act of humanization, which changes a relationship in our mind’s eye from an interaction with an object-person into a dynamic relationship with other beings, who are engaged in their own processes of “becoming” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)\(^\text{12}\). In this constant process of transformation, we begin to perceive that we have choices in who we wish to be and how we wish to live their lives. Foucault states, according to Freire and Macedo (as cited in Greene, 1988, p.190), that those perceptions are what allow us to not only “read the world” but to write or rewrite it.

If relationships are always in process, then it follows that cultures that arise from interactions between members of a community are likewise always in process (Bode & Nieto, 2012)\(^\text{13}\). Furthermore, that the creation, adherence, and transformation of values and traditions within those cultures are specific to the individuals of whom they are composed, and the perspective and practices these groups develop reflect their strategies for interacting with their physical, social, and emotional environments at those particular historical moments (Bode & Nieto, 2012).

\(^{12}\)“Becoming” is described in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

\(^{13}\)Bode and Nieto’s book, *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (2012), draws on an amalgamation of the thoughts of scholars such as Beverly Daniel Tatum, Gary Howard, Charmaine Wijeyesinghe, Bailey Jackson, Kris Gutierrez, and Barbara Rogoff in the construction of this model. It is referenced as a representation of contemporary educational thought and practice.
However, those strategies don’t constitute the society itself, nor do they set its “destiny”, because they exist as much in the realm of process and possibility as the other various elements involved in their composition (Freire, 1998).

In *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2005) Paulo Freire (2005) describes his pursuit of a more equitable world through education, and he tells us that these dynamic qualities constitute a shared ethical responsibility to guide a culture’s becoming and to create an awareness of that process amongst its members. Freire also states that communities should be seen as interconnected entities rather than isolated individual units, as a belief in perceived isolation intensifies a feeling of alienation, which in turn allows a people to be divided. Humanization, through empathy and understanding and the act of reaching out to one another, lowers those barriers and helps to foster change. To practice this level of empathy can be difficult and sometimes painful though, as it leads to “the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality” (Freire, 2005, p. 43).

In the face of such a circumstance it is not unusual for a practitioner to accept a set of circumstances as an inflexible and certain reality, not as a pliable possibility. This amounts to acceptance of the situation as “normal” (Foucault, 1984), wherein the differences that might be made are perceived as being absorbed into a homogeneous system. This disheartened fatalism encourages docility in a people, but that passivity is tied more to the historical and sociological situation than an essential characteristic of those people's behavior (Freire, 2005).
It is this exact acceptance of the everyday that a practitioner of empathy resists, with the understanding that if "we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices" (Greene, 1995, p.23).

A person engaged in a caring-practice occupation like education specializes in helping others to imagine and pursue these alternatives to achieve transformation, a role that requires both a knowledge of the techniques involved in their craft as well as the “sentiment and skills of connection and involvement” that conflict with the way that knowledge and expertise are usually defined (Benner & Gordon, 1996, p.46). These skills are distinct in that they are a “culturally constituted, socially embedded way of being in a situation with others” (Benner & Gordon, 1996, p.43-44), which must remain innovative and fluid even while drawing on previous encounters to adapt to the unexpected and the particular needs of that relationship (Benner & Gordon, 1996, p.45-46).

It is important to note that though caring-practice encourages its practitioners to cultivate sympathy, an acknowledgement of the feelings or experiences of others, it doesn’t necessarily encourage empathy, the mutual exchange of trust between individuals. While a person who is cared for is encouraged to trust and be open-minded towards the practitioner working with them, that same trust and openness must also be present on the part of the practitioner towards the person being cared for in order for true empathy to exist. What is more, while the influence and power of the expert is emphasized, the responsive capacities of those they work with are often ignored (Benner & Gordon, 1996).
The absence or inclusion of trust and openness in relationships is enmeshed with the context in which they are situated, and in the role that power plays within that context. Power can be as difficult to pinpoint as empathy, because the dominant group in any situation tends to think of the values it supports as “normal,” while the values of a subordinate group are seen as deviant or wrong (Foucault, 1984, Bode & Nieto, 2012). That which is normal becomes taken-for-granted and accepted until it is recognized and made apparent as an exercise of power, generally by a pattern of behavior rather than by what occurs in a single instance (Blizek, 1999). This presents difficulties for professionals in caring-practice occupations who wish to also practice empathy, as a professional’s expertise is presented as a mysterious force that is “responsible for a reality about which nothing can be done” (Freire, 2005, p.173), specifically that the cared-for should submit to the will of the caregiver, which sets up barriers that are defined by that power. This is not to say that the authoritative role should (or could) be entirely abandoned, but that it should be understood to exist in a relationship with a state of freedom (Freire, 2005), and that this relationship must not go unexamined if empathy and transformation are the professed goals.

**Challenges for empathy in educational communities**

There are particular stresses within an educational community that affect caring-practice and the ability to employ empathy. In order for empathic (rather than sympathetic) practice to even be possible, education must be conceived of what Freire (1998) calls a “practice of freedom” (p. 75) that is housed in understanding humanity and the world as existing in relation, not in isolation, with one another.
This relational understanding mitigates the problematic relationship that exists between a narrating Subject (the teacher) and listening objects (students) about matters that feel disconnected from reality, and therefore either unimportant or inalterable (Freire, 1998).

Illuminating that interdependence is an eternal challenge for educational communities, because of the differences in expectations between families, teachers, and administrators regarding the purpose of education is and how it is to be achieved. The lack of understanding between members of the communities regarding these differences leads to alienation and lack of empathy between them, and is responsible for much of the strife, confusion, and frustration that occurs in interactions between community members.

One impediment in creating an understanding of those differences is that the language of educators and politicians is often not put in a context the parents and students can relate to, resulting in an oppressive feeling of alienation that separates school and life (Freire, 2005). For example, the well-intentioned attempts to provide learning environments that are “free from bias” do little to help students confront the unequal society they will be surrounded by as soon as they leave (Bode & Nieto, 2012). This error begins in the practice of education as domination, in which learning and context are supposedly distinct and autonomous entities rather than interrelated actors (Freire, 1998).

Furthermore, despite attempts by reformers, schools continue to be expected to process students as a “human resource” in the name of “economic competitiveness" (Greene, 1988, p. 12), and to focus on the skills, proficiencies, achievements, and techniques that parents believe will allow their children to be successful (Greene, 1988, p. 14).
Often it is believed that these goals can be efficiently achieved by manipulation from without by mandating particular practices, with the implication that those directly involved in the educational community should comply for their own benefit (Greene, 1995). Because educational specialists are generally concerned with conceptual growth and on the subject matter, they stress individual and developmental differences that present students as abstractions, as an object of study, in place of a human being (Greene, 1967). The result is that students are separated into individual cases whose status is equated with their mastery of what has been decreed to be “knowledge” (Foucault, 1984).

Greene (1995) refers to this point of view when she states that "seeing schooling small is preoccupied with test scores, "time on task", management procedures, ethnic and racial percentages, and accountability measures, while it screens out the faces and gestures of individuals, of actual living persons” (p.11), in other words that it focuses on the use of discipline to isolate and catalogue (Foucault, 1995) rather than to consider the importance of the webs of relationships at play. Greene goes on to say that this situation may seem equitable from an external view when systems of measurement are divorced from names and histories because there is an assumption that the policies serve existing social interests.

In pursuit of turning out an acceptable level of quality in their “product”, administrators and teachers are encouraged to see themselves as “functionaries” in the system (Greene, 1988, p. 13). Within this hierarchical bureaucracy, which introduces (or reflects) relations of domination and subordination (Noddings, 1996), an administration has internal demands for self-perpetuation and equilibrium (Greene, 1995).
These desires and demands orient administrations toward “stability, continuity, and predictability” (Noddings & Shore, 1984, p. 170), which then tend to favor prescribed methods and policies that channel students down particular paths rather than seeking emancipation, the creation of opportunities, and critical thinking (Greene, 1995). While the intent is to create a safe environment that reliably creates what are imagined to be ideal citizens, a measurable student within a measurable population (Foucault, 1984), an isolated and overly prescriptive approach discounts the role that context and individual agency plays in education and therefore actively inhibits the role empathy can play in an educational community.

To be a professional teacher in this environment requires a practitioner to be highly skilled as well as emotionally dedicated to the growth and well-being of their students (Noddings, 1996) while simultaneously facing bureaucratic and social obstacles to fostering intuition and empathy (Noddings & Shore, 1984). This is treacherous ground, because a teacher can become convinced that it is their mission to "give" their knowledge and techniques to students without realizing how their lessons are shaped by their own objectives, convictions, and preoccupations (Freire, 2005).

Freire (2005) states that this divide, between the granter and consumer of knowledge, is the greatest impediment to education; and that the solution is to reconcile “the poles of contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 72). To do so, Greene (1988) suggests that educators examine the dehumanizing forces of society as obstacles to becoming by empowering students to create spaces of dialogue and “humanizing possibilities” (p. 13).
The key to these concepts is to supersede the limitations of sympathy in caring-practice, and to embrace the possibilities afforded through practicing empathy with all members of an educational community, not just between students and teachers.

There is, in effect, a conflict of cultures within schools that makes the development of trust difficult and restrains the ability of various members to consider alternative viewpoints, and thus alternative structures. Within the current structure collegiality is actively discouraged; by prescriptions of how teaching ought to be done, warping autonomy into passive resistance; by separating administration from education; and by dismissing teaching as a skill and as a profession (Noddings, 1996). Everyone within the community has ideas about what they believe to be best for the community, and what they believe to be fair and just for the people who are connected to it, and as a result much of daily life in a school is an unspoken dialogue of power that has the potential to be painfully antagonistic. Moving this discourse into a recognized space, one wherein it can be understood, challenged, and modified, represents a liberation from that oppressive silence.
Communities of play

Tension and uncertainty

Hans’ (1987) field of play represents a space where preconceptions, such as those surrounding education, may be challenged. It is useful in discussing this subject to revisit Hans’ (1981) definition of play as “an experiential mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world” (p.12). The field of play is a space wherein those understandings are developed by challenging previous experiences and pre-conceived notions through the introduction of new ideas and experiences, a challenge to the personal and communal limits that exist around any given concept. A field of play is defined not by the subject or object, but by activity and disruptive potential (p.2).

Different elements are enregistered with different modes in the field of play based on what they emphasize or consume, and these modes form locations that provide a context of understanding. While humans often shape forces within the field of play (Hans, 1981), the field still remains focused on the activity rather than on the humans, and the direction of the play can never be completely controlled. This is partially because of the relational nature of humanity\textsuperscript{14}, and partially because the different points of location-consciousness of participants represent different fields of play that can be grafted and incorporated into each other, altering context and perception.

\textsuperscript{14} As discussed on page 43.
I adapted this system of thought to construct what I call a *community of play*. A community of play is a collaborative tool for disruption through collaborative exploration of boundaries, one that follows Nietzsche’s (1927) dictum that "A thousand paths are there which have never yet been trodden; a thousand salubrities\(^\text{15}\) and hidden islands have life" (p.81). Nietzsche sees the unforeseen possibilities that exist for our lives, both those we might seek and those we might wish to avoid, which are comprehensible in their potential for being actualized and infinitely complex in the directions they might lead. A community of play seeks to use virtual experiences to explore these potential realities and in doing so engage in a theory of possibility, a possibility enabled and determined by the existence and inclusion of its particular members.

Members in a community of play share a thematic field of play (Hans, 1981) that describes their common interest, but roles and stances are reflexive and fluid. This fluidity invites disturbance, and that disturbance fosters an understanding of alternative viewpoints that are incorporated into the experience of each member. This requires openness and commitment on the part of the members, as well as an understanding that within such an assemblage some frustration with the unknown or unexpected is inevitable (Hans, 1987). Changes to the composition of the community of play, commonly through changes in membership, constitutes an entirely new community with new affordances and limitations. As Deleuze & Guattari (1987) say “If you change dimensions, if you add or subtract one, you change multiplicity. Thus there is a borderline for each multiplicity; it is in no way a center but rather the enveloping line or farthest dimension” (p.245).

\(^{15}\) “Salubrities” refers to things that are favorable to health and well-being (Merriam-Webster, 2015).
In Chapter 1: Introduction, I discussed how communities of play function as both a personal and communal disruption that may alter or redefine perception and context. To establish the principles of such a community, I drew on a variety of philosophers that spoke to the nature of play whose approaches diverge at some points including Nietzsche (1927), Hans (1981), and Deleuze, & Guattari (1987). However, no single approach represents “progress” over any other, and I emphasize that it is the intersection of strands of thought contribute to my understanding of what play is and how it affects our lives. Each of these constructions focused on how these relationships, and the tensions that existed between them, produced what was perceived of as “reality” (Foucault, 1984).

As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest, this reality was itself a multiplicity that incorporated connections from "a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)” (p.23) into its being. The discourse between the various elements, the representations of concepts these writers have put forth woven into my understandings of the world, alter my perceptions and thereby also alter my reality. My transition through fields of reality is imparted into a field of representation, this dissertation, through which readers create a subjective construction of who I am and what I mean to say.
In essence I establish a field of play (Hans, 1987) around the concept of play, focusing in on particular themes to create an understanding that exists in flux as explorations of ideas continue, and one which depends on areas of difference from its sources as much as it does the collusion of similarities. In *The play of the world* (1981), Hans notes that while the ideas require orientation because without them “no understanding at all would be possible because there would be no way to isolate and structure events, no way to order them” and that “understanding is always finite, always limited by the names derived from our play” (p.19), we can still incorporate different perspectives into our own understandings (p.125). Hans (1981) also says that while a person may be influenced and to some degree imitate other writers and philosophers (in his case Gadamer, Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and Nietzsche), the fields of play in the writing are inevitably different than those writers because their source is an amalgamation of ideas and contexts (p.76), a synthesis of simulacra that represent divergent and cohesive points.

The discourse I have built around the concept of play is applied in two significant ways. The first, which I touched on in Chapter 1, was in the construction of a framework that integrated multiple perspectives from several philosophies, methodologies, and cultures into a unique symbiosis. There is a degree of play between the ideas I have introduced wherein the representations the authors produced did not agree. This is purposeful, an incorporation of Freire’s (1998) belief that critical pedagogy invited ideas from multiple perspectives, even those antagonistic to our own, and Law’s argument that a living, organic theory must be free to engage in its own transitions (1999, p.10).
Secondly, foregrounding the research as play, as “an experiential mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world” (Hans, 1981, p.12), invites the possibility that the research could be reflexive to the needs and actions of the community of play. For the community to have the potential to function as more than the presentation of pre-existing ideas, in order for it to be a dynamic and organic construct, the members had to use the space of the sessions “to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make inter-subjective sense” (Greene, 1995, p. 39). This meant not having the concepts and values of any given philosopher to be considered the ultimate “truth” that the community should work towards, but rather that the community could use those ideas to imagine and create something altogether new. Games scholar Bernard De Koven (1978) described my goal in this best when he said "When we all own the game, when we all acknowledge that we are merely trying it on, seeing if it fits, because it might work, no matter who suggested it, we become remarkably, astonishingly empowered" (p. 116).

**Making meaning through play**

One important intersection is the existence of the dynamic tension between that which appears to be static or fixed and that which seems chaotic or mutable. Nietzsche, whose work inspired the other philosophers of play I have used, begins *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1927, 1954) with an illustrative vignette of a ropewalker whose act mirrors the tension of the human condition: the stress between where we were, are, and will be in time and space.
For Nietzsche this tension is represented by his concept of *will-to-power*, the eternal struggle to create order from chaos by mastering our surroundings on a both conscious and subconscious level. As the ropewalker negotiates his journey a buffoon joins him on the line and, despite the performer’s threats and pleading for him to leave, startles the ropewalker into falling to the ground. Mortally wounded and in despair, Zarathustra tells him “thou hast made danger thy calling; therein there is nothing contemptible” (p.14), which puts the man at peace. The point of the “ropewalk” is that it is a source of constant strife, prone to uncertainty, and fraught with unavoidable risk, but the idea of the walk is not to actually reach a goal or state of perfection. Instead it is to fully engage in the dynamic process of existing, what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) refer to in *A thousand plateaus* as *becoming*.

Becoming refers to the process of transition that all things undergo as time passes. This is not a change from what was to what is, but rather an ongoing redefinition of any given thing that continues as time moves forward and things intersect and interact. This is true of people, as Nietzsche (1954) noted when he said we are "a bridge and not a goal" (p. 8), of societies, which Freire (1998) says "are in the process of being what we make of them in history" (p. 267), and of reality itself, which Greene (1988) refers to as an interpreted "perpetual emergent” that develops as encounters occur (p. 23). Becoming also refers to objects, such as how a book contains both physical materials and abstract ideas that are, for whatever appearance of firmness they have, in the process of being something else. I discussed this in the context of fields of play when I described my transition through fields of reality as I encountered and adapted new ideas.
Becoming as a concept is important to this research because it frames Hans’ understanding of play and undergirds the thinking behind a/r/tography, which my methodology draws on, but even more so because it defines the purpose of the research. My goal was not to liberate art educators from an oppressor, nor to work a transformation upon a community of play so that it would function as I thought it should, but to work with the community of play to gain a better sense of how becoming affects who we are and how we see others. It is difficult to gain a sense of how the lived experience of our own lives shapes our actions, and very easy to presume that we are alone in that struggle. Nietzsche (1954) said this as "Never did the one neighbour understand the other: ever did his soul marvel at his neighbour's delusion and wickedness" (p.60). If we accept Freire’s (1998) contention that the world is reality in process, and that how we act is a function of how we see ourselves and our relationships (p. 77), then trying to understand how those relationships are experienced is essential to any serious consideration of how we might transform realities within a society.

Becoming defines how change occurs within what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) named an *assemblage*, a collection of connections and intersections, where in one piece of that assemblage is drawn into another. The ideas and acts that meet at these connections are what they call a *rhizome*, a construct that “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, *intermezzo*” (p.25). Rhizomes constantly fluctuate between different states, and as they intersect with new ideas and experiences new rhizomatic lines of flight emerge as a reaction to those encounters.
The rhizome serves as “a map and not a tracing” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1998, p.12), not an exact copy as a tracing would be, but rather a simulacra (Deleuze, 1990) that deviates from an original while still existing as a representation of it. This process propels becoming, which is neither imitation nor analogy of the rhizomes that intersect with one another, but something altogether new that is less a case of replication than of a thing influenced by its progenitors. Deleuze & Guattari (1987) tell us that "becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation” (p.238), which is to say that rather than a thing being “improved” or “advanced” from its previous state it is now something altogether new. This is a departure from what Foucault (1970) poses in The order of things, wherein he suggests that incremental differences between one state and another mean most things are just collections of imitations distinguished by signatures, while Deleuze & Guattari maintain that each collection is unique but not autonomous and certainly not passive or static. While I agree with Deleuze and Guattari, the discourse between these points simply served to reinscribe the tension in my research between what it means to be an individual and what it means to be part of a community.

Understanding “becoming” as a way of being is difficult because we perceive the “before” and “after” of any given moment as wholly self-contained, linear, and static conditions that exist separately from others, as opposed to the interconnected web of space and time that Hans (1981) refers to as location-consciousness. Location-consciousness could be considered a “snapshot” that encompasses a particular segment of space and time upon which several different assemblages intersect to produce an effect, a way of focusing our attention on a particular transition.
This transition represents a becoming to the assemblages that are involved, rather than the dichotomous opposites (happy and sad, healthy and sick) we tend to associate with transformative moments that, according to Nietzsche (1977), result in the "unspeakable amount of painfulness, arrogance, harshness, estrangement, frigidity" (p.86) that has entered into human feelings. A more accurate view of the fluidity of existence can be found in Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) claim that rather than a binary of old and new, there exists a range of experience between static and dynamic states. However, our understanding of these states is always partial. In fact the partial view is itself as fluid and reactive to the experience as our own lives, putting us "always in a state of being and becoming" (Lester, 2013, p.138).

In being in an altered yet familiar state, the simulacra that result from intersections represent completely different lines of flight than the concepts from which they emerged, and will continue the process of creation and deviation by spawning their own simulacra. Within these transitions and simulacra exists Hans’ (1981) play: an “experiential mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world, and all experience within such a mode is confirmed or denied in the playing-out of the experience” (p.12). By engaging in play we feel out the boundaries of relationships, “learning the points of resistance and the points of flow or connection” (Hans, 1981, p.12), and begin to perceive how those relationships function.

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16 Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the terms molar and molecular in place of static and dynamic, on the basis that it describes physical solidity or diffusion as well as an action and state of being. Because the focus of my work was on the rupturing of ideas that appeared to be permanent, I prefer to employ these terms instead.
In Hans’ (1981) conception, play is a framework that creates a particular orientation, without which we cannot perceive the structure of an experience or idea, thereby eliminating both understanding and meaning. Like any such structure however, our view is defined by our situation. This situation can be conceived of an assemblage wherein rhizomatic lines of flight that share a common theme intersect, and the possibilities of any given experience are directly tied to the interactions within that assemblage. Through the play of these assemblages it is possible to perceive an order to the “milieus and rhythms” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.313) emerge from chaos, and to make sense out of the experience. The dynamic potential the chaos represents can be maintained by actors in an assemblage “collectively being in control of being out of control” (Lester, S. 2013, p.137), which requires both an awareness of being a part of an assemblage as well as the will to accept and engage with the risks of uncertainty and to identity.

It is this tension that exists in the relationship between the establishment of a framework of understanding and the retention of the natural fluidity of ideas and possibilities that make play possible. In Nietzschean terms this is the stress between the Dionysian urge, conceived of as wild and intuitive, and the Apolline aesthetic, which represents cognitive and rational realms. These concepts are not a diametrically opposed binary, but exist as a unified state wherein we recognize that the "Dionysian recognizes that everything is transient and temporal and that fixed truths can only be hinted at via the Apollonian" (Dixon, 2009, p.4).
This coexistence is particularly important to keep in mind when Hans (1981) suggests that play is actually only separated into the sensuous and the rational after an experience of play rather than during it, and that “it is not that perception and reason are active at the same time in the aesthetic but that perception and reason are one and the same thing in the aesthetic” (p.114). In other words, the experience of play is a synthesis of the whole but the process of “making meaning” or “making sense” is an imposition of division. Play, then, is a moving point in a rhizomatic relationship, and the effects and products of play represent entirely new lines of flight whose course is not (or at least not entirely) predictable.

**Uncertainty and the field of play**

No matter how adept we are at anticipating events, the future always contains the possibility of the unexpected (Lester, 2013), which in effect means that “when playing with an idea, one has to learn to follow it where it goes, not channel it where one would like it to go” (Hans, 1981, p.56-57). If we accept this as a guiding principle, than we also accept uncertainty and risk into our process. Chance and uncertainty intersect with will and action in transitions; Nietzsche’s buffoon appearing on our rope to shake us loose of what appears to be our given path and into the unknown. Many times that uncertainty originates from an aleatory point inside our own minds, actively influencing us towards actions that seem to serve no logic or reason (Bogue, 1989). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) invite us to actively pursue this disruption, and to see that where it occurs new lines of flight emerge.

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17 “Aleatory” describes dependence on uncertainty or contingency (Merriam-Webster, 2015)
It is in these disrupted moments that we perceive how we exist in relation with the world around us rather than as a separate individual, and in those moments that we most find ourselves in a state of play (Hans, 1981).

**Identity in play**

Within this state of relation, the nature of identity becomes fluid, inviting the possibility of seeing oneself in one of a number of roles. Nietzsche (1927 & 1954) noted this shifting view when he said "A heretic wilt thou be to thyself, and a wizard and a soothsayer, and a fool, and a doubter, and a reprobate, and a villain" (p.81). The struggles we go through in our life are defined by the act of “becoming” and the multiplicity of roles we assume in that process both as individuals and as members of communities. Sometimes we become active in this process, actively engaging in the creation of self for any number of purposes. As artist Brody Condon has said “You’re playing roles every day. Why not play one that you’ve created?” (Krasinski, 2010).

While engaging in play offers opportunities for exploration of identity and thought, it also carries some risk. Firstly we must understand that this is an active process, meaning that "it is not the case that anything can happen; rather, anything can happen given, or by creating, the right conditions" (Lester, 2013, p.137). Given the role uncertainty serves in play it can be difficult to discern what exactly those conditions are, and entirely too easy to believe they have been accounted for. Therefore it’s best to assume the same adductive principle in the design of play that we do in thinking through play, that our conditions should be reflexive to the direction of thought.
Secondly, when engaging in play with one another we must strive for openness and a willingness to “put ourselves on the line” in some manner (Hans, 1981, p.12), because in so doing we accept that the experience may be transformative towards our understandings of the world, as well as to our own perceptions and identities. In the case of my research that is the entire point, that by meeting in a community of play we both affect the experience and are affected by it.

The transformation of personal and community identity bound to location-consciousness that occurs within a field of play is not a shift from one state of being to another, remembering Nietzsche’s (1977) stance that "through words and concepts we are still continually misled into imagining things as simpler than they are, separate from one another, indivisible, each existing in and for itself“ (p.58). So while in my dissertation the multiple was an examination of relationships that “coexist, interpenetrate, and change places” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998, p.36), I also admitted there is complexity outside of the realms that I discussed. For my purposes, I focused on people as individuals composed of multiplicities and (somewhat paradoxically) on multiplicities composed of people.

Deleuze and Guattari (1998) visualize this, saying: "Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first” (p.8).
An example is found in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) wherein Deleuze and Guattari use the identity of Professor Challenger, the fictional yet well-known scientist from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *The Lost World*, as a mouthpiece for their ideas. Professor Challenger is described as performing a puppet show to illustrate play between different personalities and ideas. Deleuze, Guattari, Doyle, Challenger (effectively a puppet himself), *A Thousand Plateaus, The Lost World*, and Challenger’s puppets all exist within a web of relations that is further complicated by the reader, whose own location-consciousness and relations with the elements combine to create additional layers of multiplicity within the assemblage.

These multiplicities can create a vision of life too chaotic to comprehend, which creates tension between our perceptions of the world as “spatially and socially segmented” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.208) and the pursuit of understanding through blurring and removing the barriers between those segments. In our awareness of the inherent falseness of this segmentation, Nietzsche (1927 & 1954) believes that we continually grow masks as an illusory facade crafted in relation to our perceived world. The masks represent what we think of as our identity, composed in relation to the ideas, imagery, and ways of living that we believe define us.

Thinking beyond those definitions and pushing at one’s own boundaries is an attempt to reach out for a goal that Deleuze & Guattari (1987) as well as Nietzsche (1927) note that we are forever attaining without ever being able to reach, a point of perfect completion.
Hans (1987) believes that once we realize we co-exist in multiple fields that our concept of an individual identity begins to break down, and along with it our concerns over trying not to imitate those around us. Without that concern he maintains we more freely experiment with ideas in a field of play because we recognize ourselves as a component of the multiple and feel less risk to our individuality. Individuality does play a role in fields of play though, because multiplicity admits "no stable entities but only of 'dynamic quanta', and hence must be understood in terms of difference rather than identity" (Bogue, 1989, p.150). Furthermore, according to Deleuze & Guattari (1987) "wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual” (p.243) such as leaders, loners, demons, or shaman, who assume roles that define the borders of the multiple, and determine what effects and experiences the multiple may have.

If we contrast this with Daniel’s (2006) definition of community\(^{18}\) we find a tension critical to all communities, but that I especially want to highlight in a community of play: that as much as a community is unified by their similarities, it is the differences between the individuals that they are composed of that define their borders and their potential. As Deleuze & Guattari (1987) note in *A thousand plateaus* “If you change dimensions, if you add or subtract one, you change multiplicity. Thus there is a borderline for each multiplicity; it is in no way a center but rather the enveloping line or farthest dimension, as a function of which it is possible to count the others, all those lines or dimensions constitute the pack at a given moment (beyond the borderline, the multiplicity changes nature)” (p.245).

\(^{18}\) As cited in Chapter 1: Introduction on page 25.
In effect every member of a community represents a simulacra of its unifying characteristics, with each trait meaning something entirely different at each point of location-consciousness in the field of play, and each member representing an aspect of this essential difference.

Ultimately, the intent of the community of play is to create disruption within itself and its members in order to invite new ways of seeing, and the creation of experiences to facilitate that is reliant upon interaction between members. There are no endpoints to these explorations, the meanings they produce being eternally open to new experiments and interpretations (Lester, 2013). The play highlights the process of “becoming” members undergo by visibly disrupting their quotidian existence in a space and time specifically arranged for such a disruption. The encounters draw on and create experiences that define and redefine the way the members interact with their professional relationships and with the other members within the community of play. The limits of what a community of play can do are directly relative to its members. They determine the “borderline” of the multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.245) through the intersection of contexts and attributes they possess and through the level of willingness they have to pose questions about their personal and communal identities (Hans, 1981).
**Examples of contemporary communities of play in the arts**

In order to work towards the construction of an effective community of play, I looked to examples in contemporary arts practices to serve as exemplars. These exemplars serve to provide instructive examples of art-making that is reliant upon uncertainty and collaboration, embodiments of Deleuze & Guattari’s (1987) statement that to "attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it" (p.22). There are as many variations in doing so as there are people to have attempted it, but for my purposes I have narrowed down the selection to three artists (Allan Kaprow, Anne Hamilton, and Brody Condon) whom I believe approach what I have described as communities of play, and whose work further defines the borders of what such a community might be. It should be noted that these artists have worked in collaboration with others in the creation of their communities of play, and therefore assume a facilitator-artist role rather than that of the heroic individual artist. In each case the artist creates experiences that are reliant upon collaborative effort to explore different types of relationships, which allow some fluidity of identity from the members of the community, and which unify their communities around particular generative themes.
Allan Kaprow

Allan Kaprow is best known for his “Happenings” in the 1960’s and his transformation of everyday experiences into disruptive personal rituals, which provoked reflection on the borders between life and art. Kaprow’s work has been seen as being akin to larp (Stenros, 2010, p.304) because of his pursuit of “playmates”, whose active participation determine the outcome of the experience (Kelley, 2004, p.51), and the incorporation of routine tasks and meanings drawn from science, myth, and society to construct ephemeral productions that leave no physical marks, but do leave “the experience of experience” (Kelley, 2004, p.67).

One example is the Happening Kaprow facilitated in 1970 when he was a teacher at CalArts, Publicity (Kelley, 2004). Around a hundred students worked in small teams to improvise wooden structures from two-by-fours on a beach that was often used to film television and movie material. While the teams worked, the “most interesting” works were recorded by roving documentarians with bulky devices and immediately played back for workers, influencing the direction the construction would take and playing with the connections that had evolved between art and media in the production of spectacle. As designed, the teams of students were either assuming the identity of artists designing works for commercial appeal or the identity of “taste-makers” who determined how that work would be seen. The resulting themes considered both the commodification of art, but also the complicity of artists in that commodification.
Publicity was not meant to have a climax other than any designed by the students themselves, an expression of Kaprow’s experimentation with collaboration, though there was an event during the day that caused an unexpected rupture. A group of CalArts students who had not been part of the Happening arrived wearing stockings and ski masks and attempted to set the structures on fire. Concerned about the dangers the fires represented, Kaprow and a student physically intimidated the group into retreating. For Kaprow this event confronted the fact that, for many people, Happenings had become a form of permission for indulgence and reckless behavior. This led him to consider the ethics of the works he was helping to create, and to alter his practices.

Kaprow and disruption. In Publicity I found three forms of disruption are at work that can be incorporated into the designs a community of play creates: 1) that which Kaprow planned, such as the limited materials and team that recorded the work; 2) that which he anticipated, such as how the physical and social environment would affect the process of creation; and 3) that which was imposed upon the piece, most obviously the students who attempted to burn the structures and the resulting confrontation. Through the interaction between these disruptions and the community of play, we gain a sense of the borders of that community and what it was capable of. In reading about it we may also gain a sense of personal meaning about the exchange. The piece illustrates that Kaprow created his works in the knowledge that “life would intervene no matter how refined the plan” (Kelley, 2004, p.141), and that this uncertainty made the work valuable for him.
Ann Hamilton creates multi-sensory installations of mutable materials to “serve as an invocation of place, of collective voice, of communities past and of labor present” (Hamilton, retrieved July 9, 2014). In much of Hamilton’s work time appears and reappears in a constant refrain of media, process, and theme, though viewers experience only a fraction of the installation’s entire process (Robertson & McDaniel, 2013). The artifacts and imagery Hamilton uses are tied to the history of the architecture and community of the sites, and interaction with the sensory experience of the work is what provides meaning by connecting with our “faculties of memory, reason and imagination” (Hamilton, retrieved July 9, 2014). Hamilton’s work could be seen as an expression of location-consciousness, with the connections between space, time, sense, and context are made visible in an audience’s interaction with the work.

Consider Hamilton’s *The Event of a Thread*, a 2013 installation at the Park Avenue Armory (Hamilton & Edmunds, retrieved July 9, 2014). A video of the piece may focus on the complex mechanical affordances audience members interact with: a series of pendulum swing sets where the sway of one participant impacts the sway of their tandem partner who is obscured by a massive billowing curtain; an actor’s recitations spoken and transmitted to the paper bags the audience members carry and relocate throughout the space; the coo of the pigeons sitting by a person writing "to human emotion and places far away", whose convex mirror contains the tableau occurring behind their back and glimpses the outside world; and the occasional reedy bleat as the bellows of accordions nestled in the rafters are compressed and released.
Hamilton described *The Event of a Thread* as a work informed by history to create an interconnected interrelated whole and expressed through the metaphor of cloth: “In a cloth, every single thread is necessary to make the whole cloth and become something larger than the individual parts.” The tableau embodies both individuality and wholeness, and is dependent on every participant in determining the form it takes, has taken, and will ever take. When a person participates in *The Event of a Thread* they join a chorus of interactions, in effect assuming the identity of the “thread” to which the title refers. The actual direction they take as that thread, whether swinging in front of the curtain as an animating force or participating solely through their presence, alters the entirety of the experience at any given moment. The weaving of personal and sensory connections extends past that moment, reaching back to the history of the armory, to Hamilton’s personal and professional influences, to the assets and contributions the show required, and to whatever “threads” the audience members bring with them and create through interaction in that transformative space.

**Hamilton and space.** One aspect of Hamilton’s work worth noting in the creation of a community of play is how she prepares a physical and social space that makes play possible, and the effect this preparation has on the resulting themes. Where Kaprow had scripted Publicity around his own ideas and had recruited students to fill particular roles that fit within those concepts, the themes of *The Event of a Thread* emerge through the encounter between the frame Hamilton prepared and the audience’s decision to interact with it.
They are a confusion and integration of touch and time, messages in space “gathering together across difference”, which present the possibility of crossing with the many elements and their associative lives. There was no possible way Hamilton could plan for all the ways these crossings will occur, or for her to know how they will affect the lives of the participants who play an integral role. What she’s done is to create a space that makes those crossings possible and visible, and allowed the experience to affect the space and thereby the discourse, spinning new lines of flight into directions never before conceived.

**Brody Condon**

Among the artists presented here, Brody Condon is the only one to have explicitly used larp as a media for the creation of art. The point in doing so isn’t to create a replica of an experience, but to investigate a field of play based around cultural situations and political structures and to provide tools “to allow you to go through a lot of life situations that you wouldn’t have access to otherwise” (Krasinski, 2010). Condon states explicitly that role-play is not acting, nor is it meant to be: “It’s not about this relationship between the actor and the viewer. It’s about this relationship between a player and a character” (Condon, 2014). To that end characters are actually designed by the players themselves to fit into the field of play suggested by Condon for a piece.

*LevelFive* (Condon, 2014), arranged for exhibition in the Hammer museum in 2010, was set in the context of self-actualization seminars from the 1970’s such as the Erhard Seminars Training.
To create the mechanics of LevelFive, Condon hired Scandinavian game designers Bjarke Pedersen and Tobias Wrigstad to help design opportunities for interaction that did not push the field of play outside the borders of the fiction it operated within. For the two days the game went on players stayed “in character”, emoting and experiencing the imaginary seminar in front of three cameras whose footage was mixed live and analog for the public during the event. Ideally by the end participants (and audiences) would come to understand something of what actualization seminars were and what they meant to achieve, connecting the audience with the ideas and experiences of an earlier generation, while also gaining a sense of the value and function of self-created fictions (Krasinski, 2010).

**Condon and perception.** One thing LevelFive excels at illustrating is the potential a community of play has for exploring how perspectives overlap and interact. To participate in a field of play like LevelFive means to collapse boundaries between periods of time and points of view, so that a participant occupies a state where the virtual and the real are the same thing. The addition of cameras and audience (unusual in a larp) breach the line between performance and play, and provoke questions about who exactly a character is interacting *for*. The public presentation is especially worth considering given the value both larpping and the seminars place on trust, and the connection that trust has with the ability to be vulnerable. It is possible that players used the mask of the persona they had designed to move that vulnerability to the simulacra of their character, however given the state of relation that exists between them some amount of bleed (Våker jeep, 2007) between player and fantasy is inevitable.

19 “Mechanics” is a common term for the rules, structures, and guidelines that facilitate play in a role-playing game.
Game studies

My application of American freeform as a media for participatory arts-based inquiry necessarily drew on literature from *game studies*\(^{20}\). Game studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines both games and effects related to them (Montola, 2012, p.18). Through these studies games can be understood as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (Suits, 1978, p.41). While there are those that stress the differences between play and games on the basis that games have connotations of illusion and frivolity (Hans, 1981, p.vi), such a stance makes the mistake of accepting those assumptions as “givens” and ignores the potential game-playing presents for a social meaning making experience.

**Defining games**

Games can be described as being composed of: a goal; a means of achieving that goal; its rules; and a willingness to play and abide by the strictures of the game (Suits, 1978). Games can also be understood through Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) game design schema as an intersection of rules (the organization of a system), play (the human experience of that system), and culture (the contexts engaged with and inhabited by the system). Assuming this stance affords the ability to focus on meaningful play, which is to say the symbiotic process wherein players, the structure of the game, and the experience of play are interrelated and have an effect on one another. Actions taken within this relationship result in a change of the overall system, which in turn creates new meanings.

\(^{20}\) This should not be confused with *game theory*, which mathematically models decision-making.
Mary Flanagan (2010) says that “games are systems for imagining what is possible” (p.51), a capacity that is exercised in a variety of ways as entertainment and as an art form. Firstly there is the fact that play and art spill over into our lives as experiential acts, abstracting everyday actions into defamiliarized instruments (Flanagan, 2010), and offering new insight into the performance of quotidian existence (Homan, 2013). This disruption exists in part because of the high degree of agency players have in determining the outcome of a game (G. Costikyan cited in Flanagan, 2009, p.7), even while the role and impact of uncertainty is made clear in its structure. Secondly, games create a malleable space in which players can push at boundaries to discover the “principles, possibilities, and limitations” (Flanagan, 2010, p.49) of the environment, the underlying ideas, and the players. These environments are especially useful for examining systems and concepts because of their “multifaceted and dynamic, rule-based nature” (Flanagan, 2010, p.51). Lastly, games function as a media that highlights and is dependent on relationships, particularly social relationships. It is because of those relationships that the game is able to occur, as it unfolds in a shared space made distinct from other spaces in which players collaborate not only on the decision to play together, but on how they will play (Homan, 2013). This in turn develops relationships that refer specifically to the experience of that constructed game-space (C. Lehrich, cited in Bowman, 2010, p.52).
Games as research

This wealth of potential makes games a unique vehicle for research, one which combines uncertainty and collaboration in a manner capable of embodying an experiential method of acquiring knowledge that is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate. There are precedents in art and in art research for these applications. The Surrealists employed game structures in their “exquisite corpse” writings and drawings, and in so doing made games a part of their process as opposed to an outcome. Through these games they distributed thought amongst participants in a “pooling of thought” that transcended the limited perceptions and self-interest of the individual members in the creation of an artifact of group research (Flanagan, 2009, p.160). More recently, the Tiltfactor laboratory enacted a large scale collaborative urban game called Massively Multiplayer Soba, which invited players to "grab some friends and traverse remarkable neighborhoods in New York City ..... Talk to strangers, find clues, and fetch ingredients for a giant collective noodle party!" (Flanagan, 2010, p.50). The game contained clues written in several languages to encourage discourse with the residents of non-tourist neighborhoods in New York, leading to collective dinner with local people.

In the construction of research that employs games as a framework it is important to keep in mind what Jessica Hammer (2013) articulates as the principles of respectful design: (1) a respect for the player through reflexive construction of the game structures; (2) respect for the context in considering the culture, material, and society they engage with; and (3) respect for the limits of the game in acknowledging that “Games don’t change the world. Players can change the world”.

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In the case of the project they were developed during for example, which was meant to empower teenaged Ethiopian girls, that meant conceiving of games that required few materials (such as sticks, stones, and words), which encouraged standing up and speaking about problems, and which exhibited and rewarded kindness. It also meant resisting the desire to control players, to attempt to “give” them knowledge, or to force a different culture of play upon the players. It is my opinion that a failure to maintain these principles would hobble the liberatory and transformative properties of a game.

**Role-playing games (RPG) and American freeform**

In RPGs players have the ability to define and redefine the properties of an imaginary world (Montola, 2008) through the game’s system of rules, which serves as a framework for communal storytelling and identity alteration (Bowman, 2010). In an RPG a player is the creator, subject, and audience of a co-created experience, a point of view known as the “first person audience” (Sandberg, 2004), and view the game both from the lens of their own eyes and those of the character’s whose actions they dictate, resulting in an interpersonal and intrapersonal experience. This multiple view incorporates three different identities: that of the real-world player, the character, and a “virtual-real” character that is a blend of the two. This interaction is one thing that makes possible a kind of action referred to as “steering” (Montola, Saitta, & Stenros, 2014), which is when players choose to have a character act for nondiegetic reasons such as making other players feel included or to achieve a goal that is important to a player or players.
Role-playing is distinct from acting for two reasons: firstly that the purpose of assuming the role is not to imitate others through a false-identity, rather it is to inhabit a false-identity so that a player can play a role; and secondly, that the actions and decisions players make in a role-playing game are either an evocation of a dramatic response or a response to an evocation, not a facsimile of such interplay as in a staged performance. The lack of a script leads to uncertainty, which is part of what makes it a game, while the co-operation between players in maintaining the play is part of what makes playing the game worthwhile (Suits, 1978). This process is both active (players exercise agency through their characters) and reflexive (choices develop both the character and the context), meaning that the character and the game play are simultaneously created through the actions of the players (Gee, 2005).

American freeform particularly draws on the tradition and techniques found in larp. A larp is distinct from other forms of RPG in that it emphasizes a visceral physicality of lived experience, and requires actions to represent the movements of characters within the game. For the purposes of the game players impose a conception of imaginary space upon an actual place, a pretense maintained through eidetic reduction (such as ignoring elements that do not fit into the game-space construct), and semiotic re-signification to translate forms into ones acceptable for the diegetic reality of the game (J. Harviainen, cited in Bowman, 2010, p.49-50). American freeform games aren’t entirely conceptual nor physical but “semi-live” (Stark, 2014, p.5), and make use of several meta-techniques that interact with temporal, cognitive, and emotional space.
They draw on the physical qualities of larp for several purposes: they make bonding experiences more accessible (Stringer, 2014), reduce confusion between a narrated act and a performed one, encourage an exploration of questions about proximity, connect the experience to a communal location, and enable interaction with environmental and physical objects to inform upon that experience. The question of the effect American freeform as a media of inquiry has on knowledge creation and the development of relationships for the participants remains, but there are definite hints of its potential for defining and redefining ideals of self and community.

The potential RPGs have as an art form was beautifully expressed by game designer and organizer Brianna Sheldon (2014) on her blog:

Gaming and the gaming community has opened up my perspectives and shattered my assumptions. It’s allowed me to play away from type and find secrets that I kept even from myself. It’s even helped me learn how to respect other people and their differences from me.

Role-playing fractures reality and changes our perspectives in a way that can heighten our sense of self-awareness and create a feeling of unity within the group. This allows us to explore ideas and events that frighten us or that we repress in a safe, low risk environment and to extend our understanding of the perspectives (and fears) of others as well (Bowman, 2010). This requires a series of communal acts on the part of the players, each of them based on the ability to trust one another and on the principles of gaming outlined above.
The players have to accept that in the liminal space of the game their identity and those of others in the game are those of “players”, a role which eliminates (or at least de-emphasizes) their normative positions in the secular world and replaces them with new temporary responsibilities. By doing so players put themselves on common ground, which helps them feel comfortable expressing themselves and to feel a degree of distance between the game and their lives, which allows them to take risks. The ability to take those risks is important, both for pushing the narrative of the role-play and for bringing the game “closer to home” (Walmsey, 2009, p.11), a space wherein players can examine things that matter to them on a deeply personal level. Making room for those risks involves encouraging other players in the creation of their own ideas, rather than attempting to shut them down, by beginning any response to a suggestion by thinking or saying “Yes, and…”, and building from there (Walmsey, 2009, p.21).

**Conclusion**

This chapter established an understanding of the relationships between the cultures of discourse and play entwined within the design of my research. The discourse of power frames the relationships in educational communities as exercises of objectification through isolation and alienation. That system is disrupted and subverted by empathic practices that re-establish the humanity of community members, a process that “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 2005, p. 72).
By engaging in that inquiry as a community of play, participants push against the borders of what they know and gain insight through experiences that would not be possible in any other setting. In the next chapter, I describe how the theoretical and conceptual frameworks intersect with the methodology and the lived experience of play through the media of American freeform. In effect, where this chapter established the context, the next one describes the process I used to transform that context.
Chapter 3: Design of Study

Introduction

My methodology, epistemology, and media of inquiry formed the symbiotic structure upon which this study is built. Each aspect represented a distinct field of play wherein disparate parts interacted to form dynamic generative themes, and transversal interactions between those themes in their respective fields of play affected the form they took during the research. As was the case in the previous chapter, several different methodologies, epistemologies, and philosophies have been put into discourse in this chapter. This multi-method approach is by nature complex and organic, as was necessary for it to be reflexive to the needs of the community of play while still providing a framework that defined the field\(^21\) in which play happened. A case for this design can be summed up in ANT researcher John Law’s (2005) attack on the “notion of theory that says that it is or should necessarily be simple, clear, transparent” (p.8). The notion is that in some cases irreducible complexity is more representative of the experience the research represents.

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\(^{21}\) Both communities of play and fields of play were defined in the previous chapter.
My methodology, participatory arts-based inquiry, provides the rules\textsuperscript{22} to my research by incorporating ideas and practices from Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER), a/r/tography, and the critiques of their assumptions and practices to create a framework that links social imagination to a sense of possibility and empathy (Greene, 1995). Because this research is collaborative in nature, I incorporate elements of design from participatory action research (PAR), particularly the conceit that using multiple modalities to generate and collect data contributes to a rich, nuanced, and dynamic body of knowledge (McIntyre, 2008) and that participants need to feel their contributions are acknowledged and worthwhile in order to create a productive set of relationships (Stringer, 2014). It also integrates the principles of respectful design (Hammer, 2013) discussed in the previous chapter by maintaining a structure that was reflexive to the needs of the participants, the contexts to which it is connected, and the limitations to what it can achieve.

My epistemology draws on actor-network theory (ANT) to frame, analyze, and express the various changing fields with which participants are connected, describing the play\textsuperscript{23} that exists within those structures. American freeform, my media of inquiry, was the place wherein the play, rules, and culture most visibly co-existed. Its attributes allow participants to present and analyze personal and communal views of the world through an embodied experience that emphasizes the relationship between context, thought, and action (Freire, 2005).

\textsuperscript{22} This refers to Salen and Zimmerman’s (2014) schema for meaningful play, in which the rules speak to the organization of a system that allows play to occur. See figure 1 in Chapter 1: Introduction.

\textsuperscript{23} This refers to Salen and Zimmerman’s (2014) schema for meaningful play, in which play refers to the human experience of a system of rules, as well as Hans’ (1981) conception of play as a tool for confirming or denying experiences.
I use games as a source of narrative inquiry, apply discourse analysis to the reflections participants supplied, and collectively analyze visual artifacts the participants created, which enabled me to craft a series of in-vivo codes (Givens, 2008). These codes closely represent the participants’ words and actions in order to connect the data with the lived experience of the research, and were used in the creation of the rhizomatic maps for the visualization of the community of play’s constructed and actual realities. Codes and maps were both subject to member checks in order to assure accuracy and aid in the determination of the direction of the research as it progressed.

Methodology: Participatory arts-based inquiry

The purpose of using arts-based research is to create and investigate knowledge that is experiential in nature, knowledge that has the potential to change how we think about or interact with the world around us. Graeme Sullivan’s explicit argument for this form of research is that “the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research.” (Sullivan, 2010, p. xix). Arts-based inquiry is the ideal methodology for this research because, as cultural geographer Simon Rycroft (2011) suggests, it can "apprehend rather than represent the world” to utilize the senses and express the experience of a world in a state of becoming (p. 164, italics in original). Arts-based inquiry performs three roles within this research: it unifies element for participants; it serves as a media of inquiry; and it provides forms for the presentation of knowledge.
The execution of those roles draws on the integration of the altered perceptions of arts-based educational research (ABER), the multiple perspectives and disruptive capacity of a/r/tography, and the critical lens provided by Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) in *Arts-based research: A critique and a proposal*, which disrupts assumptions about arts-based inquiry regarding the authorial voice of the artist-researcher. In every case, I keep educator and scholar Graeme Sullivan’s (2010) dictum that "We create to understand. We imagine as we come to know" (p.65) at the forefront of theory and application. What results from these intersections is a methodology that I refer to as “participatory arts-based inquiry”, a symbiosis of praxis, poeisis, and aisthesis that expresses Greene’s (2001) belief that “imagination follows us to reach beyond, to reach—not toward the predictable, but towards the possible” (p.163).

**Critique integration**

As in the previous chapters, the methods in play in this chapter are in discourse with one another and with the other elements of my dissertation. However, what makes my methodology somewhat unique is that I have incorporated Jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) direct critique of the common practices of arts-based research. As I stated earlier, this critique is not meant to end arts-based research, but to resist a tendency towards stratified thought and a priori understandings so that the full potential of art may be brought to bear.

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24 See Chapter 2: Literature Review and the Methodology section of this chapter.
In their words this involves seeing the contribution of art as "something radically other than the voluntary movement of memory (reflection), the application of representational matrices (transcendence), or the deployment of laws known prior to that which they apply (morality). It is via the act of the necessity of thinking that founds truth so that it may be unleashed from that which we have already discovered, given ourselves, or derived from an image set out in advance" (p. 5). In short then, it explores the advantages afforded by not having complete control over what you do, how you do it, or what the result may be.
Even when they stand in contrast with those of ABER and a/r/tography, jagodinski and Wallin’s perspective contributes to the discourse rather than terminating it. In this way they are fulfilling Freire’s (1998) belief that "The role of the progressive educator, which neither can nor ought to be omitted, in offering her or his "reading of the world," is to bring out the fact that there are other "readings of the world," different from the one being offered as the educator's own, and at times antagonistic to it" (p. 244).

If we conceive of the authors to be members of a community of play centered on arts-based research as the field of play, then their critique can be described as an attempt to push against the boundaries of that field. jagodinski and Wallin refer to the disruption of their text as their “act of betrayal”, meant to initiate a line of flight to affirm unthought and create new problems in a manner that runs counter to concepts and people whom the authors admire. It is their belief that "the goodwill shared between friends is insufficient to apprehend a radical "outside thought" that forces us to think" (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 4). Art acts here as a mediator, representing the multiplicities we are composed of and interact with for the expression and interpretation of our relationships with the world. The authors fully expect a betrayal of their text in return, one that challenges and disrupts what they recognize as the limitations of their own thoughts.
Voice, stance, & purpose.

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Table 1: Voice, stance, & purpose

While jagodinski and Wallin believe the intent of arts-based research is laudable, their critique highlights interconnected challenges that had to be addressed in order to formulate the multi-method approach I devised. I have distilled the concepts and challenges down to questions of voice, stance, and purpose, and described those attributes as they represent a/r/tography, ABER, and participatory arts-based inquiry.

“Voice” describes the framework through which the researcher engages with their work, and speaks to role an individual researcher plays. “Stance” refers to the philosophical and structural basis for the research, the larger beliefs that are common no matter the researcher.
“Purpose” describes the goals the research is grounded in. The borders between these attributes are semi-permeable as one will most certainly affect the dispositions and actions of another.

**Voice.** My use of the term “voice” describes how a researcher engages with their work, and speaks to role an individual researcher typically plays. Because this role is in many ways the performance of a relationship between the researcher and their methodology, it should be understood as also representing the performance of their identity.

**A/r/tographic voice.** A/r/tography “emphasizes the process (praxis) through which practitioners draw upon their Artist, Researcher, and Teacher identities to artistically engage (poeisis) in research and (re)questioning their understandings (theoria)” (Lea, Belliveau, Wager, & Beck, 2011, p.3) The chief conceit is that not only does the inclusion of art alter the frame of reference, as is the claim of ABER, but furthermore that the context of the researcher can be changed to offer an even wider array of points of view. What a/r/tographic practice looks like depends greatly on the context it is situated in, but it can be described as “a living inquiry of unfolding art forms and texts that intentionally unsettles perception and complicates understandings through its rhizomatic relationality” (Irwin et al, 2006, p.79).

In a/r/tography the researcher’s voice represents their hybrid identity as an artist/researcher/teacher, in theory creating a single composite voice of their inner multiplicity, as well as the effect employing that voice has in determining the nature of an artistic encounter.
jagodinski and Wallin (2013) characterize a/r/tographers as researchers that use different “hats” (artist, researcher, educator) to perform different functions (art research, education), diverse roles that have significantly different purposes and which may lead the research to become caught in an internal struggle that leads to narcissism and subjectivism. jagodinski and Wallin feel an a/r/tographer’s competence with their varied “hats and tasks” determines the effectiveness of their method, which would mean the whole of the research suffers at some point since very few people are equally capable in each area. They assert that assuming that “hybrid” role (described in more detail later this chapter) means to some degree discarding the affordances of the individual contexts of which it is composed, as a person within that role cannot help but to represent particular interests.

However, this struggle is sometimes part of the point, as Manrique (2014) noted when she says that “the challenge might start with the acknowledgement of the different ideals and interests of these identities that requires a/r/tographers to be very aware of their inner tensions and contradictions” (p.158-159). As conceived, the different perspectives of an a/r/tographer are not meant to be seen as being at one point an artist and at another a researcher or teacher, but rather to acknowledge and encompass an identity that is constantly in transition, a shifting center through which interior and exterior alterations may be perceived as integral to the whole (Pearse, 2004).
As advantageous as that may be, it connects to another challenge to the voice of a/r/tographic inquiry and in arts-based research in general: how the life and will of the artist is tethered to “creative doing, self-fashioning action, and self-reflective reportage” (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p. 87). Since an a/r/tographer’s multiplicity is centered on particular beliefs and agendas, their interpretation of their own process and product compel readers of the research to accept the meanings the a/r/tographers have made from the work, placing the a/r/tographer into a position of “thinking on our behalf” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 96). Because of the control the researcher exerts the statement of what is empirically ‘there’ in a work is beyond doubt, and any claim as to absences or additions lack referential adequacy. This results in a consensual validation of what has been seen and creates hegemonic view inherent to the system. This increasingly stratified point of view is in a state of tension with the intent of the methodology, as its incorporation of new tools and unfamiliar territory is meant to unveil, not enshroud, layers of meaning that had not been encountered (de Cosson, 2001)

**ABER Voice.** Voice in ABER is formed from acts of creation and interpretation, and is situated in a particular context that affects the perceived meaning of the experiences and knowledge contained therein (Sullivan, 2010). According to Eliot Eisner, the figure most associated with ABER and with arts-based research in general, where literal words only serve as proxies for direct experience ABER draws on an expressed meaning that is lived and felt (Eisner, 2008). Eisner (Saks, 1996) says choosing to explore and express through art in this manner inevitably affects the questions we are able to conceive and ask.
In addition to Eisner’s thoughtful construction and reflection of research in ABER, Sullivan (2010) describes the voice of arts-based inquiry as experiential in nature, in that it is used to describe and interpret phenomena through the senses in order to compile and make meaning from thematic patterns. Given that the performance of different methods of research enacts different worlds (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011), the interpretive and evocative nature of ABER can then be considered to represent both the creation and investigation of a very particular field of play.

Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) respect Eisner’s work, and say that though he didn’t invent arts-based research "he was however influential in launching qualitative research in art education" (p. 53). However they note that Eisner’s student and frequent co-author, Tom Barone, seems to regard all forms of arts-based research as a hybrid of ABER, which is problematic because of the aesthetic and humanist assumptions that ABER is based on are not universal. The understandings portrayed in Eisner’s books as “based on educational connoisseurship (appreciation) and educational criticism (disclosure)” (Jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p.53) that seek to examine and re-interpret a system without pursuing “truth”. This is an incomplete act, one that leaves a spectator/participant at a loss for how to deal with the “disruptive assault or democratic multi-possibilities” (Jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p. 77).
**Voice in participatory arts-based inquiry.** The voice in participatory arts-based inquiry is actually polyvocal in that it is a representation of collaborative experiences. In contrast with ABER, participatory arts-based inquiry may involve connoisseurship and criticism, but it is not beholden to it and does not rely solely on the intellect to dissect the encounters that occur. Instead, the voice of the research uses shared artistic experiences to nurture what Greene (2001) refers to as “communitas”\(^{25}\), a unifying shared experience that still preserves individual interpretations and differences. The tension between those states of individuality and community is complemented by the transformative nature of discourse, the defense and adaptation of identities and ideals that Freire (1998) says contribute to communal growth.

While I agree with Jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) critique of the voice of a/r/tography, that it may privilege and aggrandize one person’s view and that it can appear to serve more as self-therapy than as research, I contend that this isn’t a result of how a/r/tography, or any other form of arts-based inquiry, are designed to function. Instead I suggest that it is the result of a human fallacy, wherein the researchers have made the ontological error of viewing themselves and their lives as an *object* of investigation, instead of considering how the *relationships* they investigate connect and overlap through thematic fields of play (Freire, 2005). Consequently, the polyvocal character of voice in participatory arts-based inquiry is not designed to necessarily produce a single “truth”, but to use discourse in order to generate themes and explore questions and puzzles that result.

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\(^{25}\) Greene adapted this term from Paul and Percival Goodman’s (1966) conception of a society that employed shared experience for palliative means.
This voice is based on the concept that arts-based knowledge is not intuitive or rational, but that it "is conceived as a relationship with a variety of concrete situations" (Greene, 1967, p.162-163) and includes objective facts, perceptions centered on those facts, and generative themes (Freire, 2005). This conception does not diminish the importance of jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) critique however, as this error is exceedingly easy to make and difficult to detect without the introduction of divergent and disruptive thoughts or actions. Our community of play forms a collaborative voice from an assemblage of professionals and pre-service professionals in art education. That polyvocal experience is an essential component in how the research is performed, as well as effectively conveying the lived experience of the research and presenting new channels of investigation for researchers, teachers, and artists.

**Stance.** When I speak of “stance” I refer to the philosophical and structural basis for the research. Where voice is the localized ideology of the researcher, stance is the framework through which those ideas interact with the world.

**A/r/tographic stance.** In a/r/tography stance includes a particular approach to concepts laid out by Deleuze & Guattari (1987) as tools for disruption, and considers reality to be a dynamic entity that exists in a state of flux. Rita Irwin (2013) has referred to reciprocal nature of the researcher and the research affecting one another as “becoming-intensity”, which is "about the capacity to affect and be affected through the dynamic movement of events with learning to learn" (p.206).
jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) concern is that the a/r/tographic approach itself is too tightly structured as a form of reaction predicated on the idea that all aspects of experience can be known, in part because it is crafted with “the assumed dominance of method, scientism, and repressive powers inhering the educational project” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 99), which means that a/r/tography always takes the form of a reaction to structure.

From within their context as an a/r/tographer researchers balance their work between three points of interaction, "structure, agency and action" (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p.29), to enact a paradigm in which "doing triumphs as a form of understanding through social action research that intertwine the personal with the public" (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p.60). Through praxis these researchers link educational and art studio research as a self-reflexive act, which has a transformative impact on both the researcher and the subject of the research. This emphasis is purposeful because it causes a shift “from questioning who an artist, researcher or educator might be, or what art, research or education is, to when is a person an artist, researcher or educator and when is an experience art, research or education” (Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, & Bickel, 2008). However, like any such focus it has a limiting effect, and the emphasis on praxis and balance at the expense of other forms of understanding minimizes the potential of becoming, which disequilibrates by its “movement of becoming through which a thing becomes what it is not” (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p. 101).
An effect of this stratification is that in the process of re-thinking a context or concept artographers must separate those processes from the artwork itself, a form of thinking jagodinski and Wallin (2013) term parasitism. They employ this term because such a process continues to focus on thought as the origin of creativity, which ignores outside influences and enhances only the analytical aspects while restricting interpretations of the artwork. This is as opposed to a transversal exchange wherein both the artwork and the analysis stand to gain. What jagodinski and Wallin (2013) think ought to be pursued instead is symbiosis, in which it is acknowledged that the being of a site is already transversed by rhizomatic lines, and to ensure the quality of that relationship by constantly questioning "what art is to advance the question of what it does and might do" (p. 14).

Furthermore the use of a rhizome solely as a tool for disruption requires it stay focused on being an act of will. This is again an intentional move, as it grounds theory into active rather than abstract processes that encourage a developed understanding of the changes that occur because a person and a site are in a state of becoming. (Irwin et al, 2008). The effects are that the unconscious Real remains at the imaginary and symbolic level, and the virtual Real, where unconscious desire and unknown knowns are housed, is left undeveloped, which results in the desires and external impacts (the affect of life) being hidden by reasons (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013).

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26 I return to symbiosis later this chapter as an idea integrated into participatory arts-based research.
This mirrors a fallacy Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) believe is engendered by the multiple roles an a/r/tographer assumes, as it puts them at the epicenter of the action and makes the life and choices of the “self-fashioning subject” the primary orientation of the research (p. 89). For Jagodinski and Wallin, that desire seems to be a will-to-representation that pushes praxis and meaning-making into being a corollary of communication.

**ABER stance.** In *The arts and the creation of the mind* (2002) Eisner expresses two beliefs that he holds that are the most relevant to understanding ABER: 1) “Meaning is not limited to what words can express” (p. 230, italics in the original); and 2) “Artistic activity is a form of inquiry that depends on qualitative forms of intelligence” (p. 232, italics in the original). It is his contention that introducing a change of paradigm to include the arts altered not just how the world is described, but how we saw and interacted with the world as well, that our methods “define the frames through which we construe the world” (Eisner, 2002, p. 215). If those media are accepted as a tool for research, it then opens the way for the construction of new forms of knowledge.

This means that an encounter with art allows a shift in viewpoint so that a person may have an experience normally disconnected from their own lives, and gain insight into one aspect of what it is to be other than oneself (Eisner, 2008). A person isn’t objective in this experience, nor disinterested, and their experience is not a fixed point of blockage between two states- a dichotomous “is” and “is not”. Instead they are drawn to explore and press against the borders that separate us from one another, and to engage in that process as a transitional act between states.
Even when a person believes themselves to be intimate with the subject of an artwork, the experience opens up new ways of seeing that illuminates points they may have missed before (Homan, 2013). This stance defines what art education is for many of its adherents and practitioners, though expressing that role is often difficult to put into words.

**Stance in participatory arts-based inquiry.** The stance of participatory arts-based inquiry is directly tied to my research puzzle\(^\text{27}\): how do individual art educators convey solutions to personal, professional, and relational risks? This puzzle is especially important in an era when “accountability” has been at the forefront of every discussion of educational policy, but also in considering how art educators can use art to investigate and compare their worldviews with those held by others. Playing with those boundaries is a strength of art in the classroom (Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, & Sessions, 2006), and therefore could and should be incorporated into a teacher’s own practice.

Participatory arts-based inquiry shares ABER’s understanding that meaning supersedes linguistic limitations and that the arts represent an avenue to distinct perspectives and forms of knowledge, but the focus is not on dissecting and analyzing that knowledge but on the lived experience it is connected to. To borrow from a/r/tography, it is "an embodied encounter constituted through visual and textual understandings and experiences rather than mere visual and textual representations” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, xxix). The shared polyvocal experience introduces and incorporates what has been “other” to participants, and in so doing produces identities that are symbiotic representations of individual and communal relationships.

\(^{27}\) All my research puzzles, which focus on observable reactions and responses instead of “answers”, are listed together in Chapter 1: Introduction.
The stance of participatory arts-based inquiry is also tied to the manner in which it engages with participants as members of a community of play. This concept is derived in part from communities of a/r/tographic practice, which Irwin (2013) describes as a “community of inquirers working as artists, researchers and pedagogues committed to personal engagement within a community of belonging who trouble and address difference” (p. 80). I return to this concept again later this chapter, but it is included here as it is representative of the inherently collaborative and polyvocal nature of my methodology.

**Purpose.** “Purpose” describes the goals to which the research aspires, a point of overlap between voice and stance that contributes to the direction the research takes.

**A/r/tographic purpose.** While a/r/tography can serve several purposes it tends to begin as a disruptive force with liberatory goals, and its research is foregrounded to exist within those tropes. A/r/tography’s adoption of the rhizome is similar to the actor-networks of ANT (Latour, 1991) and they share a conception of relational products and processes and a reflexive approach to questioning (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010, and Irwin et al, 2006). Where they differ is in a/r/tography’s pursuit of disruption and in its envisioning of what is to come, as opposed to focusing on an analysis what already is. In doing so, a/r/tographic practice questions when art, research, or education occur much more than what they are or who has a claim to being a practitioner.
The attempt to overcome this dichotomy is characterized by the liminal space in-between the fields, often referred to as third space. The threat is that there is a desire by State or neoliberal powers to territorialize third space by discarding the event of becoming for a tangible knowledge-object, moving it from a state of potentiality into predictable actuality (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013). jagodinski and Wallin, (2013) say that this interpretation removes much of the "art" in a/r/tography because the purpose is no longer a mediation between social and cultural realms but authorial confrontation. A particularly common dichotomy addressed via this method is the separation between rational “scientific” thought and emotive “artistic” impulse, a hybridity that would mean "arts-based research is a form of epistemology, and not simply a form of inquiry” (p. 54).

The second purpose of a/r/tographic research is the production of meaning. Given the focus on praxis and the will of the researcher discussed in voice, the question of whose meaning tends to not be addressed. This begins when a/r/tography conceptualizes the whole in relation to becoming, implying that its borders and effects can be known, which is an encompassing view that overlooks minoritarian perspectives. Furthermore the pursuit of meaning is a decidedly human endeavor, so arts researchers fail to address that which is inhuman in art. This limits consideration of art as a force of composition that is created in relation to and capable of affecting non-human modes (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013). A/r/tography is also situated in academia, which emphasizes economic priorities, appropriability, and predictability; a model that does not favor the arts, but one that researchers are inevitably pressured to cleave to.
That being said, these pressures and predispositions are more properly thought of as attributes that create a tension between the goals and practices a/r/tography exercises rather than given facets of the research. Peter Gouzouasis (2008) uses this exact puzzle to frame his own a/r/tographic explorations in *Toccata on assessment, validity & interpretation* in which he combines discourse, narrative, and research with the metaphor of music. While it cannot be denied that the limits of context and the assumptions of the methodology do not address all the ideas that may be found in arts-based research, it is also by no means true that the knowledge and meaning that have been constructed are in some way less profound.

**ABER Purpose.** If the premise of ABER is that encounters with art can shift context and viewpoint, perceive relationships in a different manner, and express knowledge as experience, then the question of what the purpose of ABER is past exercising that ability naturally arises. As Greene (1995) explains, the artistic experience of gaining this knowledge is potentially pleasant, but that does not mean arts exist to “balance” serious or rational thought, nor that they exist to motivate study into more rigorous areas. An encounter with art may demand or provoke cognitive rigor and analysis in their own right and cannot be said to uniformly provide “beneficent, consoling, or illuminating effects” (p.27-28). Instead, art affords opportunities to change relationships with the world and with one another.
jagodinski and Wallin (2013) don’t disagree with the purpose of ABER in general, but in the specific. Their concern is that the attempt to render knowledge gained from the arts knowable and understandable, to see it as communication that can be deciphered, robs it of its transformative potential. Their context of understanding for art is for it to be something other than purely communicative, which seems an unnecessarily narrow focus in light of the multitude of "ways in which art can become cause to believe in the world" (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 10). Breaking with representational goals and moving towards anticipatory or inhuman conceptions allow for an "encounter that is the event of becoming, and hence of 'learning,' [that] emphasizes 'doing' rather than 'knowing.'” (p. 41). In this sense the research comes to represent how desire comes to be assembled through relationships to invent or create, rather than to discover, possibilities.

**Purpose in participatory arts-based inquiry.** Participatory arts-based research is in part an answer to Ben Highmore’s (2002) claim that the new experiences and new realities encountered in daily life and in art call for new forms and tools of apprehension. The point of participatory arts-based inquiry is not accessibility, enjoyment, or clarity, but rather to express, examine, and to understand a form of knowledge that is at once individual in its engagement with personal contexts and communal in its interactions and discourse connected with the work. It is a study of lived relationships facilitated through art and, as Freire (1998) would have it, an acknowledgement that existence itself is an act of questioning.
The communal nature of this research follows this logic in its assumptions that there is a value to the encounters constructed by participants. The results of those assumptions are two basic understandings: 1) that in tracing their efforts through dialogue and visual reflection the community of play can illustrate the mechanisms of authority (de Certeau, 2002); and 2) that during the games participants create art, which creates community, which leads to coalition, which demands change (Ballengee-Morris, 1998, as cited in Taylor et al, 2006, p. 46). The form of that transitive process, and its effects, are determined by the unique context of the community of play and its members.

**Integrated ideas**

My multi-method approach developed through the interaction of arts-based research with jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) critique and through principles of respectful design (Hammer, 2013), which results in the complex layers of collaboration and polyvocal expression described above. Additionally a/r/tographic literature and in *Arts-based research: A critique and a proposal* supplied concepts, techniques, and vocabulary that are applicable to participatory arts-based research, and which I adapt for use therein.

**Hybridity.** Hybridity is the acknowledgement that multiple identities are juxtaposed and performed within any endeavor, as well as a perspective from which to attempt to discern and explore what effects result from that juxtaposition. In this rumination on the puzzle of the self, a/r/tographic thought maintains that relationality encompasses more than just contexts, to include potentialities and "other thans" that are continuously in flux and that provoke meaning (Springgay, 2008).
An a/r/tographer attempts to occupy a role of artist-researcher-teacher that is “between” those contexts, rather than being one thing or the other, and to assume a point of view that exists as a multiplicity (Pinar, 2004). The aim in doing so is not to express the sum of those different identities, but to see oneself from a dynamically shifting center (Pearse, 2004). This approach exists in concert with Sullivan’s (2010) contention that a contemporary artist is “part theorist, performer, producer, installer, writer, entertainer, and shaman, who creates in material, matter, media, text, and time. And all this takes shape in real, simulated, and virtual worlds.”

Jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) chief critique of hybridity is that it is wed to inflexible structural points, and they introduce symbiosis as a more fluid construct of being. In reaction to this critique, I ask players to recursively explore the relationships between their identities as artists, educators, and researchers as well as that of imagined “other” identities, within their own multiplex identities. This means that participants exist in a state of tension between hybridity and symbiosis, wherein structures are acknowledged as existing and as having an effect on play, but also recognized as being non-exclusive, in-process, and in-relationship with one another. This understanding is extended to the other actors and effects within the research, re-conceiving them as constructions in which a multiplicity of forms and thoughts intersect.

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28 See Chapter 2: Literature Review.
Communities of a/r/tographic practice. Irwin (2008) says that communities of a/r/tographic practice serve as a “site for weaving the personal and societal aspects of our lives together, helping us make sense of our lives and the lives of others” (p.80). This community doesn’t so much try to solve puzzles that define existence as to collaboratively explore them, and to push against their perceived boundaries. Irwin (2013) originally developed the concept during a research project entitled *Becoming pedagogical*, which considered the role of interdisciplinary practices for both teaching and development with pre-service teacher candidates. She defines belonging to a community of a/r/tographic practice as requiring communal dedication to four commitments: to a way of being in the world (as a/r/tographers); to inquiry; to negotiating personal engagement within a community of belonging; and to creating practices that trouble and address difference. To these I add a commitment to humanization\(^{29}\), by which members agree to see each other as active and interactive beings, rather than objects. These commitments necessarily emphasize the need for dialogue and discourse, as well as a recognition of the state of inter-subjectivity that the community exists within.

The benefit to engaging in this form of communal practice is that it mitigates some of the problematic power dynamics encouraged by a researcher/subject dichotomy, the Foucauldian dilemma wherein those in power will assume the self-appointed task of upholding reason and truth “for” others while withholding their right to speak (Barrett, 2012).

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\(^{29}\) See Chapter 1: Introduction.
By working together to establish an atmosphere of trust that recognizes the value in polyvocal experiences and discourse, a community of a/r/tographic practice gains collective and individual insight (Irwin et al, 2006). Furthermore employing a community approach creates broader impact in the sense that the transitions that occur not only affect the multiple identities of the participants (Irwin, 2013), but other ideas and structures within the field of play that they interact with as well. It can then be reasonably assumed that the effect of this research will extend past the limitations of my dissertation, and though the degree and direction of that impact is necessarily speculative it seems at least possible that it may highlight power relations, provoke discourse, and trouble presumptions far beyond the edge of what is predictable.

**Praxis, poeisis, & aesthesis.** In describing what it is that art does, jagodinski and Wallin draw from the Deleuzian notion that objects are encountered rather than recognized. This encounter results in the creation of an unforeseeable future in which the individual will emerge as yet another event to be encountered. Because of the experiential nature of the encounter they emphasize the process of making and interacting with art, and how that process is territorialized and reterritorialized in what they term "a performative machinic understanding of the arts" (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 3).

The results of this encounter are not always liberatory, nor are they necessarily a deconstruction or complication of our lives, but they do inform how we think about and react to the world around us and our relationships with it.
It is Jagodinski and Wallin’s (2013) contention that art "must not simply remap our lives differently, but more profoundly, must become capable of remapping life in a manner capable of intensifying what it might mean to think and act" (p. 108), to explore possibilities rather than current actualities. This is to say that works of art exist in an individualized relationship with each person who experiences them even while they share commonalities in their location-consciousness.

Because of this experiential conception of art, the connections a work has to places, people, and contexts become relational and are not integral to its being. It exists as an independent monumental force that has a visceral impact on our senses, and it does so before any rationalization or meaning making take place within the minds of a viewer. From this vantage point the ideas an artist may have had in mind while in the process of constructing a work are not so much central themes as they are related components in the encounters that follow. These encounters between humans and matter produce experiences that are distinctly connected to the assemblage they occur in, and result in lines of flight that escape a strictly human point of view because they synthesize human and inhuman modes. Three interlinked ideas are useful for understand how art functions in this manner: praxis, poiesis, and aisthesis.

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30 Modes are described by Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) as "a swarm of agencies that address a posthuman ontology" (p. 23).
**Praxis.** Praxis is a familiar term for many arts-based researchers, a description of the act of “doing” that is often tied to the personal vitality and creative will of the artist, and that is linked to transformative change in both a physical and cultural sense. According to Jagodinski and Wallin (2013), praxis is tied to the idea that an artist shapes an idea or work to transform the world into a reflection of their intent, a representation of content connected to perception and defining clusters of signifiers. An outlook focused on praxis assumes the Aristotelian hylomorphic model, wherein form (morphē) is imposed by an agent on matter (hyle) to create being.

As useful as these concepts are, the reliance on conscious will, transformative effects, and “progress” as descriptive characteristics limits the usefulness of praxis when it serves as the driving concept in art and art education. This is because hylomorphic model places primacy on how states are changed or "improved", which objectifies materiality and removes agency from life. If the creative will of the artist is the defining characteristic of a work, than any aspect included unconsciously or which affects what the work evokes in others constitute a problematic, and the role of inhuman and transhuman conceptions become limited to spiritual, erotic, and sentimental purposes. Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) maintain that if we posit that the beliefs and allegiances that compose cultural identity can be changed, then we are regarding identity as a static collection of attributes rather than as a fluid state of constant becoming. While there is merit to this last statement, I would suggest that not every element of an identity tends towards the same degree of flexibility, particularly traits which are inherited through parentages or imposed by society.
**Poeisis.** The counterpoint to the will of praxis is the unconscious production of *poeisis*, which jagodinski and Wallin (2013) describe as the “making” that exists in concert with the “doing” of praxis, though it has been occluded by the notion that the will of the artist is the sole foundation of artistic inquiry. Poeisis, on the other hand, unveils truths that are “connected to neither practical consideration or willing intent” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 85) that occur when we encounter a work. Art is not to be defined as an object here, but as a force of becoming that is “autonomous from the artist, the teacher, or researcher” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 98), and that poeitic quality that deserves our attention. In engaging in poeisis we aren’t trying to discern or impose meaning on the experience, but to engage in a metamorphic process that highlights areas in “which thought and action might be recommenced differently” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 104) and our common sense cedes to an uncommon experience.

**Aisthesis.** The ability to consider the role of poeisis in art necessitates an outlook less grounded in the authorial will of the artist, for which purpose jagodinski and Wallin (2013) summon the concept of *aisthesis*. Aisthesis refers to sensations and perceptions that occur in the unconscious virtual Real, rather than the intellection of the Imaginary perceptual level. Therefore aisthesis is more suited to describing encounters with art as a force, as an *affect*, than as an object to be dissected, described, and interpreted as is in the aesthetic tradition. This is partially because that tradition begins with what is seen and not what is experienced and artistic desire is rooted in “the ability to go beyond perceptual standards” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p.46).
This desire is transversal in that it crosses and transforms all levels of the lives it intersects with, resulting in a collective invention of thought and experience that exists separately from the work of art. Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) refer to examinations of this conjunction as being self-reflexive, wherein we are aware of the differences being made and begin to envision a world yet to come.

**Disruption of self-will.** Doing, making, and sensing as personified by praxis, poeisis, and aesthesis do not represent individual components that exist separately from each other, but a symbiotic assemblage that describes an experience of art built with an understanding that it is always subjective. It has become common in arts-based research to focus primarily on praxis though, as it seems the most intelligible and meaningful aspect at first glance, to the detriment of understanding such experiences and in pushing against the borders of what is possible. Jagodinski and Wallin (2013) say that “stealing back the greatest degree of freedom from the straightjacket of representation or those habits of thought that topple over into fascism” is an ethical act arts-based research should undertake, and believe that doing so means discarding the “goodwill of common sense” and “conditions of representation necessary for agreement between minds” (p.186). The key, at least in part, in accomplishing that is to advocate for researchers to challenge the primacy of self-will and the frameworks that result in the construction of such research.
There can be no one sure way to do so, as that would merely lead to more stratification, but they suggest that a start may be found in surrendering surety of knowledge through symbiosis, emphasizing “doing” rather than “knowing”, and reaching for a double-articulation of experience that understands the world as dynamic rather than static.

**Symbiosis.** Symbiosis (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013) uses the manner in which things are connected and the relationships between them, particularly unconscious ones, to facilitate the disruption of self-will. In symbiotic thought, no creation is a production of *autopoeisis*, an autonomous product of *internal perturbation* by an individual artist, because it includes external influences to break thought loose from a static form. Symbiosis discounts hybridity as a composite being wed to structural points, in favor of conceiving of being and becoming as transversal exchange between such points.

jagodinski and Wallin (2013) claim that approaching symbiotic thought in this manner has three effects: 1) the compositions of pre-existing concepts and key points of reference are illuminated, allowing for “modification, decomposition, and linkage with other conceptual machines”; 2) it focuses on an exploration of what might be possible and explores the borders of thought; 3) it identifies points that might be “rerouted, blocked, or made to flow more freely” (p.16). Via the acceptance of a symbiotic outlook the authors believe we gain a sense of what is as well as what may be, and in so doing gain insight as to the affordances and impact of both states.

The dynamic relationships of symbiosis and the conceptualization of art exist as an encounter confirms the idea that we have “flows, not objects” (jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 41), that we exist alongside with in a plane of immanence.
In this plane, it is natural to see arts research and education are encountered as an “event of becoming” in which learning emphasizes the poeitic qualities, what we are doing, rather than what we know. Knowledge is housed in the experience and therefore formed in the becoming of the event, a subjective self-creation that emerges as an affect of the assemblage. Accepting this perspective and the contention that desire needs to be thought of “as always being assembled through relationships within a field” (Jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 41), means we also begin to explore what it means to be a part of that assemblage with regards to our subjectivity and individual existence, and to perceive and push against the barriers of who we are as people and as a species.

One way in which those perceptions are entertained is through the act of double-looking, a form of meta-thinking in which thought about perception occurs while engaged in the act of perception done in the pursuit of “feeling” the potential for life (Jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 34). However, this is effective only when that double-looking makes space for accepting the unconscious and unreal as a pertinent element. Arts-based research of this sort doesn’t aspire to communication or representation, but to an “extension of what might be thought” (Jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 165). In such a pursuit a researcher must discard common sense, and nourish a will-to-the-false that disjoints their perceptions from that what is widely accepted. The goal isn’t to produce anomalies per se, but to engage in “vigorous experimentation through which new forms of inquiry and becoming might flow” (Jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 166).
Epistemology: ANT

ANT as a theory of knowledge

ANT functions as an epistemological construct that guides research design and analysis, and which inspires the form of the maps I created to represent diegetic relationships. In Chapter 1: Introduction I describe ANT as an assemblage of techniques and conceptions for examining complex relationships through a multiplicity of perspectives offered by actors in an inter-objective network. A more romantic description could be found in the words of one of its progenitors, John Law (2005):

Actor network theory is a ruthless application of semiotics. It tells that entities take their form and acquire their attributes as a result of their relations with other entities. In this scheme of things entities have no inherent qualities: essentialist divisions are thrown on the bonfire of dualisms (p.3).

This perspective does not attempt to say the divisions between one thing and another do not exist, but that from within this framework those divisions are considered as *effects* or *outcomes* of relationships (Law, 2005).

In Chapter 1 I note ANT’s limitations on what it is equipped to describe, which is to say the exact nature of a particular situation with no anticipation for additional effects, and my employment of it as an epistemology instead of a methodology. Law (2005) admits that we are a part of the webs of relations that we study, and that those relationships “are always *more than one and less than many*” (Law, 2005, p.12).
However there is also a tendency in ANT to dismiss the idea of a *multiplicity* as a “random heap of bits and pieces” (Law, 2005, p.12) in favor of the apparently more structured “networks”, a differentiation that imposes a restricted view of what matters that would unnecessarily limited the spaces a community of play can explore.

Therefore I employ ANT primarily as a system of thought rather than a methodology, and use that system as a tool for analyzing and expressing the relationships I uncovered. This system emphasizes two particular traits: the *semiotics of materiality* and the *performative* nature of relationships. The semiotics of materiality maintain that all entities (human or non-human) are produced through relationships, which are not always linguistic in nature (Law, 2005). Performativity is the localized end of that relationship, in that those entities perform their identity “in, by, and through those relations” (Law, 2005, p.4). Sometimes, in point of fact, those relationships are performed in a way that is much stronger than the actual connections.

To express that world-view I adapted ANT into a tool for creating rhizomatic maps (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) for thinking about and illustrating how communities and actors relate within a network. Incorporated into this epistemology, and the maps that represented it, is an admission of the unpredictable nature of reality that occurs when actors meet on a field of play. The resulting images, visible in Chapter Five: Data Interpretation, describe how I understand the diegetic relationships in the particular encounters that they represent to function.
Educational communities as actor-networks

ANT was exceptionally suited to considering one of my research puzzles: why do individuals in educational communities align themselves with the interests of particular groups (teachers, parents, administrators, staff, students, etc.)? While ANT does not claim to resolve this puzzle, it does suggest some interesting points to explore. Firstly, that learning is not as constrained as it tends to be thought of, and that it exists as an effect of relational interactions "that may be messy and incoherent, and spread across time and space" (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012, p.xviii). Whereas schools are often seen as aligning with what Freire (1998) critically describes as “the banking model”, a dichotomous construct that casts individuals as spectators and consumers of a product, ANT emphasizes a more Foucauldian conception that resists reductionism and encourages a perception of multilayered interrelation (Deleuze, 1986). Within an educational community the points of intersection for learning, such as subject-specific classes, school assemblies, or field trips, are easy to perceive and examine because people and things have been placed into trajectories that foster particular “meanings, identities, and lines of action” (J. Nespor, cited in Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p.54). For example, in an art class the time and place students and teachers co-locate, the textbooks and lesson plans, art-making materials, gradebooks and assignments all converge in a web of relationships through which, ostensibly, knowledge will emerge as an effect (Fenwick & Edwards, 2012).
This complex web of classroom activities forms a cultural setting, a particular point of location-consciousness, that represents “interactional, emotional, historical, and social” (Stringer, 2014, p. 94-95) relationships that orient actors in particular ways.

Struggles within an educational community tend to center on that web of relationships as a contextual backdrop for the subject matter. This role defines acceptable contexts for learning, as well as what kinds of experiences should “count” and be recorded (J. Nespor, cited in Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Researcher Dianne Mulcahy’s (2012) analysis, a combination of ANT and empirical studies of how standards develop, suggests that when the tension of these struggles is paired with transparent and flexible thinking processes they enhance the development of accomplished teaching and learning. The need for transparency and flexibility that research points to is further supported in ANT by the understanding that the capacity to act is dependent on the relationships of other actors, distributing responsibility, dependency, and ownership into a “network of interdependencies and co-responsibilities” (Lee & Stenner, 1999, p.93) that by definition change when awareness of networks appears as a factor within those relationships.

**ANT and the community of play**

Professional and pre-service art educators in the community of play are already a part of this web, because their position orients them towards a particular point of view regarding the purpose and practice of education. Foucault (cited in Greene, 1995, p.50) maintains that teachers are agents of schools as a system of power, and that their belief in their responsibility for “consciousness” and discourse, even emancipatory discourse, forms part of that system.
Norman Denzin (1989) tells us that this does not mean members of a community do not represent their own individual points of view, but that there is an interrelationship between people, the views they hold, and the contexts they occupy (p. 19). According to Greene (1995) these relationships require disruption, interpretation, and reflection in order to highlight the ways in which both personal and communal realities are constructed.

Being a part of a community of play is the catalyst for transformation, because being a member means being a transformative element for the community as a whole, a disruption of what would be possible without that presence within that network. The rest of the community likewise ruptures the path an individual member takes by challenging assumptions in their thinking and doing. In American freeform games performed by a community of play, collaborative agency and experience are intertwined in a visualization of a world that is not real, but which matters because of the way it reacts to preconceptions and notions of what it is like to be “other”. In my research there are several networks of relations that can be understood to co-exist and interact simultaneously, which I frame through the meaningful play game schema suggested by Salen and Zimmerman (2004)\(^\text{31}\) as a relationship between rules, play, and culture.

\(^{31}\) Defined in Chapter 2: Literature Review as a symbiotic process wherein players, the structure of the game, and the experience of play are interrelated and have an effect on one another (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.33)
**ANT and American freeform**

American freeform games provides structures to facilitate play, the “rules” portion of Salen and Zimmerman’s schema. The introduction of research protocols and the expectations for the space in which we held our sessions complicated those rules, and inhibited or encouraged particular actions. The “culture” contained the overlapping contexts within the community of play, the diegetic world its members constructed, and the attributes the community ascribed to the Ohio State University as the point of location-consciousness in which the research took place. The emergent play is therefore not only indicative of a player or character’s intent and actions, but also the various forces that help to shape them. This research uses the constructed experience of the game as a tool for disruption and reflection, not to escape these forces, but to make them and their effects upon the community of play visible.

**Media: American freeform**

**Games as social systems**

This far-reaching impact may be difficult to fathom as being the product of a series of games. It is worth remembering though, as art and play scholar Mary Flanagan (2010) notes, that games create social relationships that abstract everyday actions into understandable concepts. According to Flanagan the point of play in a game is that it relies on and emphasizes the transitions between worldviews that occur when the unpredictable elements of the game are introduced to the lives of the players. While play can exist outside of them, the games represent a complexified structure derived from our impulse to play, create, and make art together (Costikyan, 2013).
This impulse enables participants to inspire and learn from one another through the discourse of play, which highlights connections between participants to encourage reciprocity of perspective (Greene, 1995) and a fostering of empathy (Flanagan, 2010). In many ways then the media for this research acted as a locus point for symbioses between the various philosophies, epistemologies, and methodologies that I incorporated into it.

Ethnographer Gary Alan Fine (1983) says that RPGs, as a specific type of game, are “dynamic social systems” (p.80) wherein player agency within the context of the game is responsive not just to the structure of the game, but to external circumstance. The constructed worlds within RPGs are their own cultural systems, with particular structures and norms that are taken for “real” within the context of the game, but which also provide a “caricature” of extra-diegetic social lives that symbolize what is “real” through simplification and exaggeration (Coleman 1968, cited in Fine, 1983, p.7). This means that the line between “play” and “real” or extra-diegetic life, a boundary often referred to as Huizinga’s (1955) magic circle (cited in Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.95), becomes visible and permeable. Through this lens an RPG can transcend the concept of being “just a game”, and be considered as a tool that affords the production of imaginative action, world creation, and possibility that improves the lives of everyone involved (Gee, 2005).

American freeform games play a role in the cultivation of empathy similar to what Freire (2005) suggests when he discusses how generative themes may be presented in brief dramatizations that do not “solve” problems, but which allow critical thinkers to explore concepts and themes from multiple angles.
By using RPGs as a conduit for critical thought, participants challenge their assumptions about how others see the world, examine their own values, and explore the effects societies have. The games act as disruptions by suspending identities and realities, and by placing players into a context wherein they are empowered to co-produce a powerful experience whose evolving form is dependent upon the action and reaction of every participant. RPGs have the capacity "to begin with the overly familiar and transfigure it into something different enough to make those who are awakened hear and see" (Greene, 1988, p. 129) by co-opting the senses to create an experience that visibly relies on each part of the assemblage it is composed of.

**The goal of American freeform games**

The structure of American freeform games function as rhizomatic maps for players, with points that move between Nietzsche’s fluid and dynamic Dionysian possibilities and the rational cognition and comprehension he finds in the Apollonian aesthetic (Dixon, 2009). Deleuze (1990) anticipates games of this nature in his description of the various games author Lewis Carroll invented for Alice's adventures, which he says have a great deal of movement, seem to have no precise rules, and have neither winners nor losers (p.58). These traits are essential in creating an effective American freeform game because they emphasize its primary goal: to experience of embodied play with others, rather than to engage in some form of competition between participants. As game design guru Bernie De Koven (1978) writes: "When you try to win, when winning becomes your goal, it becomes difficult for you to validate the conventions of our play community" (p. 99), and as a result the purpose of the play becomes lost.
Therefore play within an American freeform game is reflexive to the actions of the
players with the express understanding that the goal is to achieve an "experience and
expression of excellence" (De Koven, 1978, p.1).

The games facilitate this goal by asking participants to make themselves
emotionally vulnerable (L. Stark, personal communication, February 17, 2014), and this
vulnerability is what allows participants to trust one another, empathize with the
unfamiliar, and to expose their doubts and concerns to a community of play during a
game. Through that vulnerability participants are able to change their previous
perceptions and experiences and to decode what they have thought of the world and the
people within it, which in a cyclical process, creates new perceptions, experiences, and
knowledge to draw from (Freire, 2005). If players are willing to surrender their
(apparently singular) perspective and attempt to see through another’s eyes, their
imagination allows them to craft alternative realities that break with the taken for granted
and look beyond familiar distinctions and definitions (Greene, 1995).

These experiences may illustrate for participants what values they hold. Scholar
and larpwright\(^\text{32}\) Evan Torner states “I don’t believe that we are individuals. I think we
are simply divided among all the networks in which we circulate. These networks then
circulate certain values that we can choose to uphold. At the end of the day, which values
you decide to uphold define who you are” (personal communication, July 24, 2014).

\(^{32}\)“Larpwright” is a common term for the person who designs a larp.
These values don’t appear from nowhere, they evolve from the wide variety of situations that give content to a person’s life and makes them feel distinct from others, and they are always "temporal situations, conditioned by history and transiency" (Greene, 1967, p.163-164). Like any other factor in our being values are in process, influenced by each person’s experiences and memories (Greene, 1988). American freeform games represent a space where those values, memories, and experiences can be encountered and considered in a way that it isn’t in our quotidian existence.

**The art of role-play**

As an artistic force for exploring that space, American freeform’s structure affords participants the ability to engage in the creation and re-creation of community, identity, and reality, each of which present opportunities for engaging with empathy. The poorly defined edges of what “counts” as an American freeform game (Stark, 2014) and its general structure also challenge the authorial voice in three significant ways: 1) the low threshold is inviting to players who have different levels of experience and expectation for what role-playing is and can do; 2) it lets participants incorporate their lived experience, encouraging diversity; and 3) it introduces the concept of meta-techniques\(^\text{33}\) as a tool to intentionally disrupt narratives and to provoke unexpected thought. The encounters players share are focused through communal and personal reflection that enhance a community of play’s ability to interact with and transform one another, and in doing so to change the world around them.

\(^{33}\) A meta technique is a tool for “letting *players* communicate without letting *characters* communicate” (Stark, 2014, p.6)
Engaging in role-play of this sort is not an “escape” because the lived experiences necessarily have an effect on game play, and the games contribute insight to everyday life (Homan, 2013). Instead the creative production of experiences through play provides a wealth of possibilities for how they might enact change, and allow change to be enacted upon them (Homan, 2013), choices that encourage agency through investment and empowerment. Researcher and sociolinguist James Gee\textsuperscript{34} (2005) has said that RPGs contribute both to a visualization of lives other than one’s own, but even more importantly that they "allow people to reflect on their own identities, fantasies, and hopes in the world" (p.114), which Gee considers to be crucial to success and survival in contemporary society.

**Identity and role-playing**

Exercising the potential of American freeform rests on how the fluidity of identity within a role-playing experience contributes to efforts to empathize with others, and how it leads to a questioning of the nature of identity. Greene (1995) states that to be ourselves means to be in the process of creating a self, a constant striving towards a completeness that is unattainable without also achieving stagnation. In recognition of this dynamic existence, Freire (1988) says that the “unfinished character” of humanity exists within a transformational reality that necessitates education be an ongoing activity, as opposed to an experienced confined to a particular time and space. Therefore existence is fluid and ever changing, and filled with acts of self-creation and recreation as people strive and learn from our interactions with the world around them.

\textsuperscript{34} Though Gee refers to role-playing in video games in his work, the point applies to other forms of RPG as well.
These selves are important, as what actions a person takes are intimately connected to how they see the world (Freire, 2005), but it is when they recognize that this vantage point is always moving that they also begin to recognize how many different perspectives coexist. From inside the puzzle of this multiplex perspective it becomes possible to imagine what another’s vantage point might look like (Greene, 1967), and begin to see how that point manifests in their actions to reflect a situation in the world (Freire, 2005). Doing so doesn’t result in complete understanding, approval, or even appreciation, but it does mean a person has grasped that perspective as a human possibility (Greene, 1995). It increases their ability to empathize with others through humanization, allows them to visualize actions that were unavailable before, and to “construct meanings scarcely suspected before” (Greene, 2001, p.187).

Larpwrights are cognizant of the potential of their media to contribute to this meaning-making process. Within the games participants have a chance to explore new perspectives by “trying on different parts” of themselves (J. Hammer, personal communication, February 12, 2014), and they have permission to be something they are not or that they lack permission to be (J. Morningstar, personal communication, February 6, 2014). The shifting of identities that participants experience over the course of play encourages them to question if they need to conform to the rules of the social roles they occupy (L. Stark, personal communication, February 17, 2014), leading them towards broader systemic change in their extra-diegetic realities. Part of what enables this process is that participants are often invited to interpret and add to their characters, which are often scripted in broad strokes by the larpwrights beforehand.
If a player knows the expectations for the role they are assuming, and can work with others in the community to situate the character, then they will have an opportunity for exploration of identity while avoiding (at least to some degree) the oppression, alienation, and marginalization that they face outside of the game (Nittner, 2014).

A game experience can have real-world effects on a participant. Since a change of context affects how a group actually experiences and perceives reality (Sleeter, 2002), and what rules they think are fair or just (Blizek, 1999), participants may draw conclusions about society and their place in it as a result of a game. The attempt to see “justice” through different eyes leads to empathy for a community other than one’s own, if not active support for liberatory action, as Freire (2005) believes that the natural outcome of critical thought is for an oppressed member “to opt to transform an unjust reality” (p.174). An example of how this decentered perspective can be achieved is J. Tuomas Harviainen’s jeepform35 larp The Tribunal (in Andresen 2012, p.71-79), which explores the mechanics of oppression by engaging players in a moral dilemma. Each player assumes the role of a private in an authoritarian military whose superior officer has stolen from the scarce food stores, and has since blamed it on the innocent comrades of the characters. Over the course of the game the characters debate and argue about what to say when they are inevitably asked for their version of events, in the full knowledge that their own life may be forfeit.

35 Jeepform is an antecedent of American freeform that primarily exists in the Danish and Swedish larp community (Stark, 2015)
The diverse viewpoints of the characters, colored by factors such as how they have been treated by other characters and whether they have family, intersect with those of their players to illustrate how "deciding which sense of fairness applies to which set of circumstances is a matter of judgment, rather than the application of some single view" (Blizek, 1999, p.108). In reflecting on whatever else may have occurred, players examine how the world they occupied affected their character’s actions and ways of looking and values.

The need for the insight provoked by examining both one’s real and one’s diegetic position is noted by Faundez (1989) when he states that “in order to discover ourselves, we need to see ourselves in the other, to understand the other in order to understand ourselves, to enter into the other” (cited in Stringer, 2014, p. 200.) This process of seeing ourselves in the other, according to Nietzsche (1977), begins when we imitate their feelings and ask ourselves “why is he troubled?”, a kind of reaching outward to close the distance, but one that typically we never gets past “imitating with our own body the expression of his eyes, his voice, his walk, his bearing (or even their reflection in word, picture, music)” (p.156-157). That distance persists because of a tendency for humans to perceive themselves as isolated and autonomous individuals, a view that is difficult to avoid because it is housed the “spatially and socially segmented” lives they lead (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998, p.208). The differentiation between relationships leads people to classify themselves into a problematic self-other couplet, defined by whether or not a person is included in a particular culture.
Counter to this view is Nancy’s (2000, cited in jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p.116) argument that identity is never singular, because it is relational. From this point of view the subject/object gap, for both individuals and cultures, collapses into a membrane (a remembering exchange). The balance to be struck then is between an isolated delusion of understanding and a will-to-falseness that keeps us open to relationships that are unknown, or at least un-experienced.

According to jagodinski and Wallin (2013) it is not possible to look into the psyche of others or oneself with any degree of certainty, however the attempt to do so facilitates a complex self-relation that puts a person’s own identity-at-a-distance and enables an empathic sympathy that allows for being-with the “other” to emerge as a simulacra of the experience that troubles the borders that divide us. Speculating on the nature of existence and the impact people have on each other enables them to conceive of their individual multiplicities, and in doing so anticipate a multiplicity-to-be in which “being is no longer simply itself, but a differentiating potential for becoming” (jagodinski & Wallin, 2013, p. 107). Similarly, Greene (1998) maintains that the acceptance of a person’s point of view, either in reference to themselves or others, is always incomplete and that the potential for possibilities, as well as the pursuit of freedom, actually exists in that acceptance.

American freeform games explore that space by placing players into an embodied multiplicity with others in a field of play, one that considers “what if?” (Stenros 2010). This causes participants to push against the borders of that field, and their own personal boundaries, altering the point of their location-consciousness.
This transition informs the ethical relations Foucault says each person has with themselves: the determination of how they see their relations with others, and using that information to visualize and work towards becoming the kind of person they wish to be (Deleuze, 1986). By choosing and inhabiting the role they create through action and game-play (Gee, 2005), a player’s connection between context and interpretation is pushed into the foreground. The multiple perspectives they assume through this process further emphasize the multiple aspects of a contingent world (Greene, 1995) that exist in both the constructed and extra-diegetic realities the player is connected to. Within the multiplicity of assumed and extra-diegetic identities the “core identity”, that which a player most closely believes in and which (in their perspective) unifies the other identities, also changes as the players assumes or discards identities that exist more on the periphery of their existence (Gee, 2005).

**American freeform and reality construction**

The identities participants create are part of the constructed reality of the games in which they are developed, but also for the lives of participants outside of the game. Greene (1988) tells us that “reality” refers to an interpreted experience that “is a perpetual emergent, becoming increasingly multiplex, as more perspectives are taken, more texts are opened, more friendships are made” (p. 23). Freire (1998) concurs with this and describes reality as “a process, undergoing constant transformation” (p. 70), a view which emerges naturally as people develop their ability to see the world critically (p. 77).
Freire and Greene stress the importance of situation and location in the creation and interpretation of these realities, and Greene (1995) extends this to the “number of vantage points a person is able or enabled to take” as those perspectives unveil other aspects of our contingent world (p. 19). Through those perceptions of reality, rather than in an analysis of people, Freire tells us generative themes can be found (Freire, 2005). The themes people discover drive them to transform the world through the creation of objects, social institutions, ideas, and concepts.

The constructed alternative reality that participants interact with in American freeform games combine the relational flow of Freire and the artistic disruption of Greene to create an event that is fictional while still encouraging a “bleed” (Vi åker jeep, 2007) between the emotions and experiences of the players and the characters they embody. This is possible because of the fact that within the “magic circle” of the game, players agree that conventional truths and expectations are suspended, that certain endogenous meanings supersede particular exogenous meanings, and that the players of the game are not representing themselves but someone else, thus giving them a degree of alibi for their actions and words (Montola, 2010). The alibi and potential for affecting the world of the game also change a player’s perspective, so that “the interesting question is not “can I do that?” but “should I do that?” (J. Hammer, personal communication, February 12, 2014).
J. Tuomas Harviainen (personal communication, February 17, 2014) adds that the impact of freeform games lay in their familiarity, that “since they’re so close to home in a sense or something that at least has a strong aspect of the mundane, it means that the participant has gained a new perspective on the surrounding reality and it makes them as persons more sensitive to narrative accounts of real life or role taking or positions of power”.

Since perception in part defines capability, it follows that the introduction of new viewpoint disrupts preconceptions to create new possible courses for thought and action. Freire (2005) takes the view that these viewpoints evolve from dialog, inquiry, and reflection between people, while Greene (1995) suggests we look to informed encounters with works of art to defamiliarize ourselves with the ordinary and to disrupt our lives. Doing so moves us past considerations of what is “good” to bring our imagination, our bodies, and our emotions into play. In this pursuit, she maintains "the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected" (Greene, 1995, p. 28). The key to reality creation is not to attempt to anticipate its evolving form but to consider the openings it presents.
The community of play and empathy

Understanding how a community of play employs empathy within an American freeform game is key to understanding how they transform personal and communal realities. Greene (1995) tells us that creating a community is a process that can’t be enacted through “rational formulation nor through edict”, but that “it has to be achieved by persons offered the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make inter-subjective sense” (p. 39). While it is difficult to build a community of individuals who must be considered as distinctive voices, it is those differences that highlight the importance of what beliefs a community shares (Greene, 1995). Greene (2001) also states that we can nurture communitas by discarding adherence to shallow conventions and by being open to the thoughts and feelings of others, an action facilitated through experiences with art that allow this to occur while preserving our differences.

The reason for this is the personal-yet-communal nature of encounters with art and the interactions that surround them. Even though there are common points of connection with the art for its audience, individual interpretations are “multiplex and endlessly challenging, as each person reaches out from his/her own ground toward what might be, should be, is not yet” (Greene, 1988, p. 21). In effect these constitute multiple realities that, when shared with other participants as equals, provoke new ways of thinking and acting. The encounter provides a space for speaking, working, playing, and making that may provide a reciprocity of perspectives within the network of relationships community members occupy (Greene, 1995).
A community of play engaged in American freeform gaming creates a space wherein the disruption a character experiences exists in productive tension with the trust and support offered by other players. This begins by establishing a transparency of expectation between participants that establishes what is permissible for a particular session and which allows players to visualize what the experience of playing may entail (Torner, 2013). These expectations are important because a game is often a very intense experience, and may touch on experiences that are quite personal for its players. As larpwright Emily Care Boss (Nittner, 2014) has said “You never know when someone's going to be hit hard by something”. Playing these games entails emotional risks, which mean that the community has an obligation to make players aware of them and that they accept those risks when they choose to play (De Koven, 1978).

Freeform games further encourage an atmosphere of trust through the debriefing session, which generally occurs after the role-playing portion is over, and which is introduced as a concept as one of the expectations of play. Larpwright and game designer Jason Morningstar (Nittner, 2014) says that “When you say we are going to stop, essentially early, specifically so that we can take care of each other and celebrate what was good and process what was maybe not so good, that’s going to change the tenor of the whole session”. The debrief is a chance for players to make meaning, to apologize for actions their characters performed, and transition from the game back to reality (Andresen et al, 2012), as well as to reinforce good feelings and engage in the continuing process of building community (Nittner, 2014).
The debrief

Gee (2005) says that people “want and need to feel like heroes in their own life stories and to feel that their stories make sense. They need to feel that they matter and that they have mattered in other people's stories” (p.4). In American freeform there is no better method for illuminating how people matter than through the use of the debrief. Larpwright Erik Fatland (as cited in Nilsen, Stark, & Lindahl, 2013) defines the debrief as “a tool to foster an open, trusting, supportive culture among players”, and outlines its three primary goals: to validate each player’s experience; to translate the immediate experience and emotions into “lasting memories, reflections, and learning”; and to identify personal challenges a player experienced and to take steps towards solving them (p.15). In this sense, the debrief helps develop the potential a community of play has for exploring together by encouraging them to engage in an exercise that draws on both their shared experience and their empathy for one another. Furthermore, the debrief provides feedback for organizers that signal what points of connection are meaningful and ought to be encouraged, and where the structure of the game is not achieving what it is supposed to. While the playing and debriefing are not meant to function as “therapy” they can be very powerful (Nittner, 2014), and serve to facilitate connections to relationships outside of the game.
Reflecting on the nature of actions that occur at the intersection of identity and reality is where we begin to visualize what may be and to imagine the possible. Authentic reflection disposes of abstractions of people and their world in favor of seeing relations between people with the world, and Freire (1998) says that in these relations “consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it” (p. 75). Critical reflection highlights areas of alienation and objectification, but it isn’t liberatory unless that critical reflection results in action (Freire, 2005) wherein men and women attempt to change their world (Freire, 1998). Awareness is never the less crucial as it provides the consciousness of agency that enables a person to take the initiative needed to achieve freedom (Greene, 1988), because when oppression is perceived as natural or as a given, people cannot picture alternatives to the state of things as they are, and are likely to remain tethered to that state (Greene, 1995).

When communities interpret their shared experiences they draw on the multiple viewpoints available from its members to disrupt what is “normal”, allowing for the experience of an opening of possibilities and development of connections that determine and nurture culture (Greene, 1995). Being an individual and a part of that community empowers a member to use that interpretation in mediation between the object-world and their own consciousness (Greene, 1988), to use their empathetic abilities in an exploration of what is and of what may be.
Those ruptures, interactions, and reflections allow members to imagine that something new is possible, and to realize that “there is more in experience than can be predicted” (Greene, 2001, p.163). When American freeform is used for research, this informs the iterative and recursive cycle of implementation, interpretation, and action that is used to adapt and improve processes as the project moves forward (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013)

**Preparatory field work: Facilitating play**

In preparation for my dissertation I engaged in experiences to refine my ability to construct, facilitate, and participate in an American freeform game, as well as to envision what the capabilities of an American freeform game might be. I interviewed larpwrights, played larps and American freeform games in different settings and with varied groups of players, and created two games: *What to do about Michael?* (2013) and *Troupe* (2014). In some cases I advertised the game, chose the players, arranged for the space, and facilitated play, while in other cases the context, game, and/or players were largely unfamiliar to me. From these experiences I distilled several principles to guide my research, which took shape concurrently with the writing of this dissertation.

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36 See Appendix A for a complete list.  
37 Located in Appendix B.  
38 Located in Appendix C.
Organizing a game

One understanding that evolved from this is that organizing games is more a function for providing a space for play to happen in than for “creating” play, an idea supplemented by descriptions of games as frameworks for play. In conversation and practice I found that players in a larp or an American freeform game are happy to contribute by bringing props, additional players, or new games. Additionally, during a game players are capable of developing amazing experiences and insight independently of those envisioned by its creator, often from fields apparently tangential to the game experience. Finally, players who have some knowledge of the medium are often willing, even eager, to explain and oversee the facilitation of a gaming experience. However, player interest in arranging for a space and time for play to occur in is not typically very high. This creates a tension between the amount of control exerted over the context necessary for play to occur and the amount of agency given to players to surpass the limitations of those constraints.

When play was found to be insightful or fulfilling for an individual or for the community of play, I experienced a sense of deep personal satisfaction that encouraged my own desire to facilitate additional such encounters. Preparation makes a difference in the pursuit of meaningful play of this sort. A facilitator should always arrive to a game early, and try to create a space in which players will feel comfortable. While it is tempting for a facilitator to begin to explain the rules as quickly as possible, it is more important for players to have time to meet one another and establish a relationship separate from that of the game.
This is because doing so encourages trust between them, and because it allows them to separate what a character did during a game from what a player did. When the game is introduced the facilitator should set the tone for the game, both in describing the themes expected to arise in play and in the manner of their presentation, such as their voice and bearing. This conclusion was based of feedback from an instance in which I facilitated *The Climb* (Morningstar, 2013), in which the friendly and conciliatory manner I presented myself and the experience of play in conflicted with the themes of rising tension and paranoia meant to be present in the game.

**Mechanics and enabling play**

The experiences I engaged in represent a range of different styles of games, each of which has attributes that encourage particular kinds of play. These variables represent a wide range of design ideas, such as the importance of openness, scenography, or prevalence of theme. As an example, the constant sound of wind that plays during a game of *The Climb* creates an audio environment for play to exist in and allows for a timing mechanic wherein a break in the weather signifies a change in play, even while it does not attempt to complete the illusion of being on a mountaintop. Larpwrights sometimes lay out their goals on a pedagogical “mixing desk” (Fig. 3, used by permission of The Larpwriter Summer School.) to visualize what goals they are aiming for, but the key to any game experience is to decide and declare which rules matter for the purposes of that game.
The light mechanics of American freeform make it a useful tool for me because they make it accessible to inexperienced players and because they utilize lived experiences as an element of play, but freeform games still have a structure that dictate what can or cannot occur. In the freeform larp *Previous Occupants* (Ostergaard and Wrigstad, 2010) the number of players and the relationship between the characters are fixed constants, as is each player’s knowledge that halfway through the game at least one character will die. However the why and how this occurs emerges as the players develop the relationships between the characters during the game.

Because relationships are at the heart of the games I create, the manner in which a system generates and develops them are central to their design. Therefore, both *Troupe* and *What to do about Michael?* (Cox, 2014) foreground play by having players invest themselves in the creation of context, as well as the connections from one character to another.
Handouts describe thematic features of the games and provide a space on which players can record decisions they make during the generation stage. Writing these attributes down and reading them to the community of play helps a player define and redefine those relationships, and establishes expectations within the community for what kind of interactions will be likely. Players are given time to grow familiar with their characters and their relationships by answering questions from their point of view and engaging in short workshop vignettes, though more details often emerge in the scenes that occur in longer periods of play. My success in utilizing these techniques for these games resulted in an adaptation of those ideas for this dissertation.

**Debrief**

Though the debriefing experience has already been discussed, there are some particular insights that the experience of play has brought me that were useful for engaging in my research. Firstly, and most importantly, is that a facilitator not rush the experience, but that they allow players time to make meaning at their own pace. This simultaneously enhances the quality of the debrief and recognizes the players as active co-creators of the experience, not just consumers of a product. There are three overlapping areas I’ve found that the players focus upon: the experience, their personal perception of that experience, and the mechanics of the game. Each of these are applied to achieve a sense of understanding of what has occurred and to make personal meaning of the experience. Some structure in that process is useful, so a debriefing benefits from questions that outline ideas a facilitator wants to highlight, so long as the semi-structured nature of those questions allows for the unpredictable insight other players may bring.
Application

The primary element of play, and of games that utilize play, is that it contains a degree of uncertainty (Caillois 1961, cited in Costikyan, 2013, p.16). Indeed, it is the inclusion of this uncertainty that allow games to provide insight and to function as what Flanagan (2010) calls “reality engines”, frameworks for making meaning. The epistemological understandings of ANT, in combination with the practices of arts-based inquiry, intersect with the structure of American freeform games to create the mechanics of the games in my research. These mechanics highlight Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) meaningful play game design schema of rules, play, and culture (p.6), with three forms of uncertainty: 1) anticipated uncertainty, 2) imposed structures that create uncertainty 3) unexpected elements that cause uncertainty that must be adapted to.

Working with these mechanics allows a community to surpass the manner that role-playing generally functions as an educational tool. In those cases, role-playing has been used to explore “what if” situations that encourage critical thinking and decenter thought to shift a student’s perspective (Bean, 2011), but have rarely factored in the effect multiplicity has on human lives, indicating “positions in a social structure rather than persons (with personal attributes) in an imaginary world” (Fine, 1983, p.11).

39 Mechanics is a common term for describing how rules function within the framework of a game.
40 Defined in Chapter 2: Literature Review as a symbiotic process wherein players, the structure of the game, and the experience of play are interrelated and have an effect on one another (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.33). This schema was used both in the design of the research as outlined in this dissertation and in the design of the games the community of play participated in.
41 Discussed in Chapter 2: Literature Review as elements Alan Kaprow utilized communities of play.
In part this is because those experiences are structured with strict guidelines as to the roles and the context they operate in, little opportunity for the pre-designed narrative to be interrupted, and lack democratic investment due to its bureaucratized and predetermined framework (Freire, 1998).

**Rules: How a system is organized**

**Starting points.** I exert control over the field of play in which the community of play operates. I influence these relationships by building the initial framework of the game, which includes its purpose as an investigation of educational communities, the location on the OSU campus the research would be performed in, the people that are able to participate (pre-service and professional art educators), and what the roles of participants in the research are. By organizing the initial framework I determine the social, physical, and temporal “starting point” from which games proceed, with each of those factors representing specific affordances and limitations for the community of play.

While my decisions represent a restriction of possibility, they also present the frameworks through which community is formed (Daniel, Stuhr, & Ballengee-Morris, 2006), allow sense to be made from the experience of play (Hans, 1981), and extract meaning from the individual games (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Furthermore the structures I devise rely on the introduction of elements I have no control over, such as the unique lived experiences of participants, the manner in which the semiotic impact of the location affects their artistic interpretations (Hans, 1987), or the manner in which they have engaged with role-playing prior to having participated in this research.
This approach doesn’t just accept Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) claim that it is never possible to completely predict the experience of the game, it relies on that fact as a tool to disrupt assumptions within the community of play (including my own) to provoke a re-imagining of the world.

**Rules and meta-techniques.** The rules and meta-techniques of an American freeform game provide a framework for play by establishing expectations for the game and from other players. Because the community of play engages in a transformative act, what might be an ideal rule at one point may only serve to inhibit play at another (De Koven, 1978), so it is important that the mechanics focus on restrictions as a disruption of participant assumptions and as a provocation for utilizing the shared agency between player and character. The element of agency is essential because its performance constitutes knowledge (Flanagan, 2009) and makes meaning of the relationships between the different players and characters. Flanagan (2009), echoing Guattari, states “game actions are machines of materiality, expression, desire, and politics. In this way, a game’s mechanic is its message” (p.185).

In American freeform, the transparency of the design helps to establish player expectations of risk. Workshops before a game aid in player comprehension and comfort with the mechanics, and the debrief after a game ensures there is time set aside for making meaning and emotional support (Bowman, 2013). These characteristics make disruption possible, but it is in the play itself and the interaction between players that the pursuit of possibilities occurs.
Within this play members of the community highlight critical incidents\(^{42}\) from their professional practice, events that present problems or challenges that they wish to investigate further. These are not necessarily traumatic or emotionally charged situations, and often represent everyday events that are critical in the sense of how they illuminate the underlying structures of educational communities. The main restrictions on the subject matter explored are that it has to connect to the idea of the educational community and that all players have to be willing to explore that particular situation.

Once a situation is decided on, the players choose one or two meta-techniques to use during play. Participants are provided with assorted pre-established meta-techniques selected for their usefulness, with the understanding that they can modify or replace them as a community of play should they so desire. As an example, in *it didn’t happen like that!* (Andresen, 2012) a player would improvise a story about their character, intertwining some other characters as they go. At some point (around thirty seconds or less per turn) they are interrupted by a player who says “No, it didn’t happen like that!” and the new player continues the story from a different point of view. This approach is useful for establishing a narrative before play begins while maintaining an anti-mimetic stance housed by the idea that an event can be experienced or interpreted in many different ways. This meta-technique is useful for modelling experiences such as playground disputes between children, whose role the players sometimes assume.

\(^{42}\) This concept drew on an Action Research tactic designed for narrative inquiry (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013, p. 97)
Contrariwise the *voices in my head* technique (Andresen, 2012) explores the multiplicity within a single individual by allowing characters to argue with their emotions or memories as incarnated by other players in the consideration of an internal dilemma, as an administrator who must balance safety, public relations, and freedom of thought may feel.

Both of the techniques presented above use interaction as the variable to affect play, but external devices are introduced to the community of play as well. The larp *Before and After Silence* (Holter and Hossman, 2013) provides *action cards* and *event cards*. Players make random selections from the action cards, and each card has events written on them that must occur during a scene to foreshadow oncoming disruptions for characters. They also select random *event cards*, which establish a scene wherein disruptions have occurred and in response to which the characters now react. With both sets of cards players know more than the characters, though they have no control over the introduction of the action or event, and they use that knowledge to guide their play. Applying these techniques to actions and events characters might encounter at a school maintains veracity, while introducing elements of randomness so that players cannot know for certain what they will be reacting to.
Play: How humans experience a system

My role. It would be easy for me as the researcher, and as a person with substantial experience in art, arts education, and with role-playing to assume a disproportionately authoritative role in the community of play I help build. Indeed, in the first session it is required that I take on that role in order to put the community in motion. However, to continue occupying that role for an extended period would quell the play between ideas because that community could never grow to reach toward ideas, concepts, or experiences outside of the realm of what is personally known to me. In order to stand by my beliefs in the potential of arts-based inquiry, and in the role American freeform can play in that methodology, I choose to discard the illusion of having control over a measured transformation, and replace it with a collaborative navigation through the unknown.

There is tension in this between my desires for the community of play, which suggest that I surrender agency to uncertainty in terms of what the group seeks to accomplish, and the reality of my situation as a PhD student, which dictates that I exert a degree of control over the structures and representation of the research in order to make it suitable for presentation as a dissertation. However, the fluid and relational view of arts-based research I adopt creates an acceptance of the fact that this tension will not be resolved, and that the struggle between uncertainty and agency on my part as well as those of the other members in the community of play is integral to the research.
It is, after all, the inclusion of unconscious thought and disruption of self-will embodied in the research that gives it the potential to explore new territory for players, for educational communities, and for arts-based research as a methodology.

**Participant roles.** In the process of generating and exploring ideas and engaging in the humanization of the other, it must be understood that participants are equal partners. This is a resistance to an authorial approach to “giving” people what they need as it is based on the alienating principle that one view is subordinate to another, and that all that is needed is for appropriate knowledge to be “deposited” (Freire, 1998). Instead of regarding participants as an object of study or specimen this research approaches participants as collaborators, even while it recognizes that there is “otherness” in play between myself and the participants (Greene, 1967). To deny the input of members of the community of play would encourage a dichotomy of power, based in a lack of faith in the participants, which only claims to represent unity (Freire, 2005). Accepting the role context plays in the perception and actions of others, and incorporating their experiences, needs, and abilities, is what allows the research to move from the known to the unknown (Fingarsen, 2002) for the community of play.

Because of this participants have an active hand in the creation of the diegetic elements, the characters they play, and the created world that they occupy\(^{43}\), as well as the arc of the narrative.

\(^{43}\) Described further in the section on Culture.
The community of play as a whole determines what points of intersection in an educational community (such as field trips or parent teacher meetings) they wish to explore, and the personal reflections act as a source of ideas for future games that are connected to incidents, events, or characters that are used\footnote{This drew on an Action Research tactic wherein participant records act as insider data and as an idea pool (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013, p. 98)}.

In making space for player agency, my approach also expresses two ideas Torner (2013) calls transparency of expectation and transparency of information. Torner says that transparency of expectation is a clear delineation for participants in a role-playing game as to what aspects are or are not allowed to be introduced, and of suggesting what play might look like to the participants. In transparency of expectation players trust that they will not suddenly have the characters the characters or context transformed in a way that is counter to the social contract they have been provided. Transparency of information, which I have also integrated into the design, means that there are minimal plot or game elements unknown to any person involved in the game, such as for a player to discover one character is secretly related to another. While information may be a surprise for characters, the players share in the construction and enactment of the experiences. This requires and encourages trust and collaboration between all parties in order to function effectively.
Making space. Like any community, an American freeform community of play, constructs its own plane of consistency through places, conditions, and techniques that are irreducible to one another. Also, like any other community, it must question “whether the pieces can fit together, and at what price” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.157). This act is the creation of a territory, a marking out of the limits of what can be done and thought that “slices a stable refrain from chaos” in what Jagodinski and Wallin (2013, p.179) term inhuman thought. Being a part of such a community and being open to the pull of others within it deterritorializes the artistic “I” and allows an assemblage to “maintain its joyful urges by collectively being in control of being out of control” (Lester, 2013, p.137). In this space the community uses understandings of what players have previously encountered to fashion new experiences and to begin to visualize what may yet be.

The risk is that the community can isolate itself over time from outside thought and re-inscribe borders it means to weaken, covering the differences between members with sameness, and separating itself from the points of origin that made it vibrant. Ironically, to maintain a state of becoming a community of play must be in a state of disequilibrium. It must always be moving towards being a thing that it is not (Jagodinski & Wallin, 2013). Because stratification is subtle it can be easy to miss, but because it also appears to be inevitable it can be planned for. I challenge this static conclusion by asking players to assume different authoritative roles in the games (Boss & Holter, 2012). This de-emphasizes my own authoritative role so that the emphasis is on facilitation and not control, and empowers participants to alter the context of play.
As a starting point for what those roles are I suggest the following: an alpha player who takes the spotlight (at least at first), an idea creator to introduce narrative disruption, a historian to record important events of play, a scene ender who decides when a scene has reached an organic stopping point, and a mood minder who suggests when breaks are called for. There are two caveats to this idea; firstly, that the community decides if any of these roles should be discarded or if more are called for, both of which can change as play emerges; and secondly, that if the community of play continues gathering past the end of the research sessions, that we would incorporate additional disruptions to keep from becoming entrenched in a molar system.

Culture: Contexts engaged with and inhabited by the system

Characters. The members of the community of play in this research assume several roles that are generalized in a social or professional sense (a student, teacher, parent, or administrator), and made specific by their individual narrative, relationships with other characters, and experiences. The roles participants inhabit provide an “alibi” (Nordic Larp Wiki, 2013) to explore experiences and boundaries, while the role of “first-person audience” (Sandberg, 2004) a participant occupies ensures a level of comprehension not otherwise available. The framework of the community of play provides the atmosphere of trust necessary to facilitate play and risk (De Koven, 1978), while containing and encouraging the differences integral to perceiving where the borders of experience and understanding lie.
Because they have an “alibi”, and because they trust the other members of the community, participants have “permission” to present themselves in roles they normally would not choose. Though these identities are not technically “real”, they do have a substance to them. According to narratologist David Herman (2012), “individual narratives trigger the construction of character profiles” (p.125) by drawing on a model of a person that exists within an audience’s culture or subculture. That character within a narrative is visualized as a person, and ascribed certain mental and physical abilities based on the audience’s conception of them, to become a “person-like constellation of traits” (Herman, 2012, p.127) despite the fact that they exist within the space of a storyworld.

Scholar and educator Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) describes a four-part evolution of the character creation process in role-playing games, and though this process is dependent upon the rules and circumstances of the game they are applicable here. Bowman calls the initial conception of the persona and basic characteristics the *genesis stage*, which begins as a gestalt of intention and preconception to establish a basic theory of mind, and in many ways it defines the progression of play for that identity. Players creating a character often (but not always) focus on traits they either believe they are lacking or ones by which they believe are important aspects to their own being, and I have found that in addition to personal concerns players make selections based on social concerns and/or their perceptions of the mimetic, synthetic, and thematic (Herman et al, 2012) needs of the narrative.

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45 In Herman, Phelan, Rabinowitz, Richardson, & Warhol, 2012
In the *development stage* the character is further defined by the player through the addition of various traits and bits of “backstory”. During the *interaction phase* the player begins to play the character in concert with other players, the socialization and co-construction of narrative adding further depth to the character. In the final *realization* stage, the character is recognized as a complex and independent entity from the player. Not all the identities created in this research went through every stage, or even followed the hierarchical movement Bowman describes, but they did evolve as the community of play and diegetic reality they crafted continued to develop.

**Diegetic environment.** The community of play largely determines the diegetic context in which the games take place, save for the fact that it is required to represent an educational community of some description. The environment that results is effectively another “character” that is collaboratively created, and which is in the same dynamic, transitional process of “becoming” as any actual actor within a network. This conception rejects the decontextualization of schools that separate them from their context as creating a false conception of what individual educational communities are and what they are capable of (Greene, 1995). Furthermore, it admits that “reflection cannot exist without some level of involvement and that theoretical and practical knowledge are indeed interconnected” (Benner & Gordon, 1996, p.51), which is to say that the context in which the experiences happen in some sense is a part of those experiences. Lastly, it recognizes that in pursuing education with an eye towards empathy, a community must pay attention to their relationships with places, people, and purpose (Noddings, 1996).
While it may be suspected that participants would attempt to create some form of idyllic utopia in which to set play, a reaction against the disempowering “banking model” that represents mechanisms of oppression (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013), there are several aspects to educational communities that make that unlikely. Firstly, such an environment would not prove instructive to the participants themselves as to how to resist narrow curricula with normative expectations, and therefore would diminish the worth of the experience to participants. Secondly, though the environment might begin as an apparently stable framework, if it was to be conceived of as being “in process” some conflict would be inevitable because even in a constructed reality there is always someone invested in a status quo who will resist change (Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013). Lastly, the environment is constructed based on participant experiences in educational communities, which include features that enable and constrain educational practice (McTaggart, 2013). Diegetically speaking this means considering why meetings between colleagues, parents, students, and administrators are occurring as well as how those activities link and describe educational theory and practice, both of which have an inherent tension housed in the discourse of power.

It must be remembered that the discourse between actors in an educational community is inevitably one that involves the power that one group appears to have over another (typically teachers and administrators over students), which results in an unavoidable struggle for dominance (Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, & Sessions, 2006).
Therefore the educational community is under pressure from the players, from the
dynamic nature of play, and from the discourse of power to represent traits and situations
that more readily reflect those ascribed to real schools.

**Sensory environment.** The environment the community of play uses can be
manipulated using techniques that affect how a game is perceived by the senses, creating
an embodied bleed that influences actions a players chooses for their characters. In other
American freeform games this is sometimes done through the sound of an environment,
such as the howling wind on the soundtrack of *The Climb* (Morningstar, 2013), which
creates a visceral sense of the isolation and loneliness that surrounds the mountaineering
characters of the game. Adapted for an educational context, the community of play could
surround themselves with the sounds of nearby construction, a bus trapped in traffic, or
shouting as children run away from the school with Dionysian abandon at the end of a
school year. Other times, as in the high school party in *Play the Cards* (Grasmo, Jansen,
& Lindahl, 2013) an environment includes food, drink, and raucous music while players
wear their status in the form of playing card badges, with the higher cards having the
ability to offer or force lower cards to change suit. A cutthroat social game in a
supposedly genial environment such as this could be transposed to a staff meeting at the
beginning of the year, an open house for potential parents of students, or a large school
musical.
Data collection and presentation

Data

Data for this research takes several forms: the sessions are a source for narrative inquiry (Schwandt, 2007) as the life experiences that are generated and explored are directly tied to the context of the participants, reflective dialogue during each session pre-brief and debrief, the construction of visual artifacts that are shared with the community of play, and the individual entrance and exit interviews between each participant and myself. Each aspect of this data represents a form of narrative inquiry collected in a different time, place, and form in order to acquire multiple views of how participants view the experience and, and to explore the changes in how they see the world (Stone-Mediatore, 2003, cited in Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013, p. 96).

The debrief has various important qualities for the structure of an American freeform game that have already been explained, but as a form of data it has the particular advantage of immediacy. Because the debrief exists in the liminal space between “play” and “reality”, it allows for data that is semi-poetic46 in character with emotions and ideas still existing in a less-processed and more visceral state expressed through face-to-face discourse with the community of play.

46 Because the lived experience of poeisis can never be “known” strictly speaking, this data is self-admittedly also a representation of a more cerebral reflection. However, it never the less represents as close to an embodied description of the effects of the game and of being a part of the community of play as is possible.
The pre-brief that occurs at the start of each session gives each participant time to process the experiences from the previous session on their own. The pre-brief is paired with the sharing of player-created artifacts to serve as a reflection on the praxis of the game and an expression of John Dewey’s (1934) “interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events” (p.246) that contribute to what he calls a *vital experience*.

The community also collectively employs visual analysis (Riessman, 2008) on the artifacts they create as a tool for discourse and reflection on the themes and narratives they generate. The artifacts players create between sessions convey aesthetic data in the sense that, though it takes the form of an object, it really represents the relationships between the player, the character, and the multiple realities to which they are connected. This effect is reciprocal, meaning that as the character is defined, so too is a participant and their view of the world around them, though not necessarily in the manner that they intend. The visual media depicts the reflexive and inter-subjective experiences a player goes through in and out of character as a result of their actions. Distinct from any other method, the artifacts are largely intuitive and interpretive in the way are created and understood. The combination of the pre-brief and artifact sharing can be understood as simultaneously being an aesthetic experience, an opportunity for growth, and a vehicle through which we affect and are affected by the world. From this multiplex perspective the liminal state is recognized in that the process itself represents a change in that identity.
During the individual entrance and exit interviews players consider the research puzzles\textsuperscript{47}, which also serve to transparently describe my own intentions and concerns for the research. Comparisons between the two interviews are not meant to show “growth”, but to examine what (if anything) has changed for the participant and their relationship with the various points the research connects with. This includes not only a change in their point of location-consciousness, or their ideas about the nature of the research, but also their individual relationships with members of the community of play.

**Codes and interpretation**

The data I collected each session is used to create a series of in-vivo codes (Givens, 2008) to which I apply discourse\textsuperscript{48} analysis (Lichtman, 2013). As research proceeds I take the data collected in the form of statements, quotes, and descriptions of action and match them to the research puzzles they refer to. At this point they are represented as closely as possible in order to connect the data with the lived experience of the research. The juxtaposition of the codes generates common themes and understandings which I outline on a separate sheet for the sake of clarity. Codes are subject to member checks (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) as they are developed and revised in order to assure accuracy, and aid in the determination of the direction of the research as it progresses. These checks are done both through e-mail and in person during the pre-brief, and help further define the context the community is situated in as play progresses.

\textsuperscript{47} Note that the research puzzles were considered and revised by the community during the length of the research and assumed a different form at the end than they had at the beginning.

\textsuperscript{48} As is noted in Chapter 1: Introduction, “discourse” in this dissertation refers to Foucault’s (1972) definition of it as the representation of an event. In this research, that discourse is not strictly linguistic.
The codes also support my creation of the rhizomatic maps, which visualize the community of play’s constructed and actual realities. Following the epistemological and analytical basis that ANT provides, I portray relationships as arcing line segments, with points of intersection representing specific nodes. This reflects Latour’s (1999) description of relationships as fluid and circular in nature, rather than linear strands that connect separate poles. These assemblages form a series of rhizomatic maps of the relationships between prevalent actors (e.g. players, characters, experiences, disruptions). Like the codes, these maps are also subject to member-checks through e-mail and during the pre-brief.

The presentation of my findings would be incomplete if it didn’t incorporate polyvocal elements to honor the contributions and perspectives of the community of play. Likewise it would be a poor depiction of the experience without some form of artistic representation of the relationships and situations that evolve in the playing of the game. Those elements are portrayed in quotes from players regarding their experiences and in a visual form through images of artifacts juxtaposed with text written from a character-eye view to create a “portrait” of characters. From field notes on individual game sessions I produce a description of the contexts, characters, ideas, themes, and techniques the community of play employ. These summaries, collected in Chapter 4: Data, function as both a record of the experience and as a work that could be performed by a new community of play. Like the analysis, all representations are subject to a member-check to enhance validity and accuracy.
Conclusion

My research incorporates the views of professional and pre-service art educators to explore “what-ifs” in order to visualize possibilities for themselves, their community of play, and their profession. This is what makes an educator, according to Freire (1998), engaging in the practice of education and reflecting upon that practice. However, the goal of fostering empathy is not just to support the development of individual teachers, but to understand how a teacher’s role is situated through multiple other perspectives. Greene tells us that "There is a need for intense consciousness, for significant and moving experiences, and for the "courage to be" in a mute, indifferent world." (Greene, 1967, p.166) and there are few better experiences to fill that role than American freeform. In American freeform games a player’s act of interpretive meaning making is also an act of collaborative world-making, a change of context that represents a change in perception, and a moment in “the here and now” that infiltrates and exposes the assumptions a society adopts (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011). This incorporation of the unreal represents a point wherein the line between illusion and reality is intentionally blurred so that they may be integrated without contradicting one another (Foucault, 1984)

The American freeform games played during this research were reflective encounters that opened vistas, revealed new ways of being, and exposed mysteries (Greene, 2001).
The storyworlds that were created and occupied foreground the interaction of diegetic experiences and the mind (Herman) to illuminate four interactions within normative frameworks: 1) how frameworks affect what stories are told; 2) how context affects the framework of the story; 3) the degree to which narrative events disrupt or enforce norms; 4) how stories model the force of norms. The value of the game experience is that it encourages a heterotopic narrative, where the perceptions of these fields differ depending on both points of personal context (which character a player is using, the player’s own beliefs) and of temporal context (the perception before, during, and in the debrief of the game).

Every position within this range has valid perceptions that are no more or less true than any other, but offer opportunities for insight and reflection that offer unique aesthetic, emotional, and cognitive affordances to the players. It is from that point that larpwrights Boss and Holter (2012) state “We're here to explore. Our aim is to listen, to incorporate, to build, to listen more. To do what feels right, spontaneously” (p. 8). In the next chapter I will relate how the community of play, and the characters and context they devised, changed over the course of this research to serve as a pursuit of meaning, and as a re-conception of education as the pursuit of meaning (Greene, 2001).
Chapter 4: Data

Introduction

The Indigo School. Welcome! I’m Gerald Bloom\textsuperscript{49}, one of the counselors at The Indigo School. We are a K-8 charter school in Delaware, Ohio, about a half hour north of Columbus. It’s a pleasure to welcome you to our school, although we like to think of it more like a family really. Actually my daughters go here, Caleigh is in 4\textsuperscript{th} grade and Zoe is in 2\textsuperscript{nd}, so for me it’s true in the literal sense! Zoe’s teacher Jenny Fairborn seems to have an especially great handle on how to work with them, for which she has my gratitude, believe me! I’ve been a counselor here for three years, and can answer any questions you have about the school or the members of our community.

The Indigo School serves a diverse economic population and we’re known for our well-regarded arts program. Bella Arturo retired last year as the school’s head after thirty-six years of service to spend more time with her grandchildren. I think Bella was also under a lot of pressure to leave from the new superintendent, Bob Stevens (pronounced Stev-Ans). Stevens thinks that our school’s test scores indicate that it’s failing to serve our community, and so he’s planned a lot of changes.

\textsuperscript{49} Bloom’s viewpoint does not always coincide with my own and at times is diametrically opposed to it, despite the fact that he is a character I created and embodied. However, his voice does provide an avenue of understanding for the experience the community of play shared.
At the same time our parent-teacher organization, led by Janice McComb, wants to see the school continue to encourage creativity in the students. It’s a struggle that causes some stress among our faculty, and especially worries people who have been here for a while like W.R. Bechtle, the history teacher, and Danielle Scott, the other counselor here. One of those changes was welcoming Sean Mitchell, a veteran educator who has served as the head of several schools, as the interim principal. He is still kind of finding his feet, so I help out where I can!

Unfolding drama. The Indigo School and its faculty don’t actually exist, except as a field of play constructed by participants in this research. In this field narratively linked scenes could be performed by the community of play to develop the diegetic world, explore relationships of power, and consider their own point of view on their profession. We used the structure provided by my American freeform game What to do About Michael? to connect to the professional lives of participants, but the specifics of the context were the results of collaboration and improvisation. Players selected the initial traits of the school based on their personal experiences or on curiosity they had about how those traits would affect a community. The faculty was developed after the school, with Bella Arturo and Bob Stevens not existing before the second session, and Janice McComb not described as the head of the PTO until that same session. The varied relationships and beliefs were only loosely defined originally, and developed more thoroughly through the experience of play.
Our community of play. The participants who formed our community of play chose the pseudonyms I use to refer to them: Danielle S., Jenny F., Juniper M., and John Paul. Though their identities were kept anonymous prior to our first session, it happened that all of the members knew each other and had shared learning experiences prior to the beginning of the sessions. There was only one pre-service art educator in our group. The other three participants had completed their art education degree within the past five years, and had subsequently attained positions within various educational communities. Three of the members self-identified as female and one besides myself, John Paul, identified as a male. Participants described a range of levels of familiarity with role-playing, from not ever having done so at all (Danielle S.) to having engaged in the practice recreationally for an extended period of time (Jenny F.). All participants began the research stating that they looked forward to unique experience in which they could see the world through another person's perspective, and linked that desire to events they were currently experiencing professionally.

During entrance interviews participants expressed their awareness of how relationships of power affected their daily lives, even though they had been in the field for a relatively short period. From Danielle S.’s perspective the impact educators had on the lives of students created an obligation to recognize that many different points of view were in play. This obligation was the foundation of her belief that administrators should familiarize themselves with every level of the community, and that communication among educators was key in finding solutions to any given problem.
Jenny F. agreed, but suggested that the entire educational community ought to be involved in determining how education functioned. This was especially true for her given the power she felt members of an educational community have over one another, though in her experience this level of collaboration was uncommon. Jenny F. saw a dialogue of power in the tension between the need for trust between students and teachers and the professional distance dictated by her occupation. She also saw it in the isolation she felt as part of a team of “black sheep” that consisted of the physical education teacher, and the music teacher, the librarian, and herself. John Paul said that being in a position without a clear definition puts pressure on an art teacher “to be so many different people to so many different other people” in a way that can put their individual identity at risk, but that it also presents unique opportunities to infuse originality and creativity into the way students and colleagues perceive and engage with the world around them. Juniper M. pointed out that this is because art is particularly suited towards expressing ideas that can’t be easily verbalized, such as how life is experienced. She maintained that this allowed her to connect with students in a manner that was different from other adults and teachers, one that encouraged a more personal relationship that presented opportunities for education as well as its own risks as to how much of one’s own life a teacher ought to be share.
Session 1

**Introduction and workshop.** The inaugural session included a discussion of the format we would be using, but more importantly began the process of community creation. This occurred through the act of consuming snacks with one another, through small-talk and the exchanging of stories before we focused on the game, and through the shared experience of participating in a workshop. The workshop periods consistently proved valuable throughout the research in this regard by acting as an opportunity to “test drive” a meta-technique without it impacting the narrative, and as an enjoyable warm-up experience that didn’t focus on questions directly pertaining to our professional lives. It also offered the repeated opportunity to discuss the “cut” and “brake” techniques that helped keep play emotionally safe.\(^{50}\)

After I described the “ball of yarn” meta-technique\(^{51}\) to participants, I began a chain of relationships by throwing the ball to Jenny F. and telling her “I’m jealous of your culinary skills!” We paused to discuss how that statement could be enhanced or modified, and decided that she secretly drew her knowledge from cooking shows. Jenny F. tossed the ball to John Paul and said, in an assumed voice, “I wish my boyfriend would propose to me like you did to your wife!” He responded that he had stolen the proposal from YouTube before continuing the game by throwing the ball to Juniper M., whose sister he said he had married. The short game of improvised world creation continued until each person was connected to two others, which created the beginning of a story.

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\(^{50}\) Described on p. 38.
\(^{51}\) Described on p.37.
**Context creation.** From this point I described the basic story of *What to do About Michael?*, that we would be teachers and administrators discussing a student who was having difficulties, and drew attention to its connection to our professional lives and its focus on power dynamics as understood by Foucault. In the original script the story takes place at “The Cobalt School”, but Jenny F. suggested we rename it “The Indigo School” to highlight its differences and commonalities with the one in the script, and we agreed. Each member of our community of play, including myself, contributed a fact about the The Indigo School and wrote it down on the worksheet I had provided. These facts were developed in discussion with one another, and in some cases reacted to each other. John Paul’s desire for a diverse economic and sociological population (drawn from his professional experiences) informed Danielle’s decision to place the school in Delaware, Ohio. Jenny F. added instability when she declared that the school had come under new leadership, which none of the teachers had become accustomed to. Because we had discussed working with an unusual population, Juniper M. determined the school would be a K-8 charter school. Finally, I added a well-regarded arts program to the school, partially because we were all art educators, but also because it put something at stake for the new leadership to engage with.
Initial cast of characters\textsuperscript{52}. Each member then wrote down a name for their first character, who would be either a teacher or administrator within the school. Members answered questions about their character to define them further: their role at the school; how they self-identified; their family situation; and the number of years they had been at the school. The answers were written on the backs of nametags for players to reference and onto the roster sheet so that the information was preserved for subsequent sessions.

\textit{Gerald Bloom}. To provide an example, I shared my character while still writing down facts about him: Gerald Bloom, a guidance counselor at the school. Danielle intended to be a guidance counselor as well, and asked if she should change her plans, but I told her that it was acceptable to have two people in the same role at the school. We speculated that differences in their gender could supply narrative opportunities. I further described Bloom as a white male, a poor widower with two daughters whom he was a little lost with, and a three year member of the school faculty. Bloom viewed the school as a stepping-stone to a higher position, associating that position with the money he believed he needed to provide for his family.

\textit{Sean Mitchell}. Juniper M. wanted to impact the story, and so created Sean Mitchell, the interim principal. Mitchell was a sixty-seven year old married white man from the upper middle class. He had been the principal of a school for twenty years before retiring, and had come out of retirement to work as a substitute principal in several locations over the past four years.

\textsuperscript{52} The entire cast of characters for the research can be found in Appendix D.
While he really liked The Indigo School, Mitchell was still finding his feet. This was partly because he had never worked in an art-specific school before, but also because he didn’t know the teachers and students very well yet.

**Danielle Scott.** Danielle S. decided that her character, Danielle Scott, was a guidance counselor who had been at the school for ten years. Scott was a single upper middle class woman in her early thirties with no children, and she grew up in the area the school was located in. These traits, and the fact that she had come into a sizable inheritance, meant Scott’s life was a marked contrast to that of Bloom’s from the start, even if they shared the same occupation.

**Jenny Fairborn.** Jenny F. created Jenny Fairborn, a 2nd grade teacher who had been at the school for three years. Jenny F. declared that her relative inexperience left Fairborn unsure about her whole life. She also decided to define Fairborn as a single, middle class, white woman.

**W.R. Bechtle.** John Paul contributed the last member of the initial cast, W.R. Bechtle. Bechtle taught history to both 7th and 8th grade, and considered himself to be both a teacher and a farmer. John Paul said that Bechtle was a forty-six year old white male who was proud, but poor, and that his upbringing made him “accidentally racist”. Bechtle had been married for twenty-seven years and had six kids aged twenty-six, twenty-five, twenty-three, twenty-two, nineteen, and thirteen. He had been at The Indigo School for twenty-two years, and expected to be there until he either died or they stopped paying him. His long-term investment in the school meant that Bechtle was worried about the changes that were taking place.
### Teacher Roster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Self-ID</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Gerald</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>White male, Poor, 1</td>
<td>Widower, 2 girls, 8 yrs,</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloom</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Sean</td>
<td>Interim</td>
<td>White male, upper</td>
<td>Married for 8 yrs.</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>middle class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Danielle</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>From area, white,</td>
<td>Early 30's, single, no</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>female, upper</td>
<td>children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>middle class,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Jenny</td>
<td>2nd Grade</td>
<td>White female,</td>
<td>Early 30's, single, no</td>
<td>3 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairborn</td>
<td></td>
<td>single, middle</td>
<td>children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. WR</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Teacher, former</td>
<td>Married, 6 kids,</td>
<td>22 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle</td>
<td>7th/8th</td>
<td>white male,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Powell-Roane,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accident-Respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School Name:** Indigo School

1. It is in an area with adverse economic population
2. School has new leadership (Superintendent)
3. K-8 Battling Charter School
4. Elementary 8th
5. Well-Regarded Arts Program

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**Figure 4:** Initial worksheet for The Indigo School
Michael. After we described our characters to each other, we discussed the student we would be meeting about: Michael. We decided that Bechtle would be his teacher, placing Michael in either 7th or 8th grade, while Fairborn had his younger brother in her 2nd grade class.

Character Relationships. We used the “ball of yarn” technique to define the relationships between the characters we had created. Jenny F. began the chain by tossing the yarn to John Paul and declaring that Jenny Fairborn was envious of W.R. Bechtle’s passion and security in his job. John Paul added that the recent changes made W.R. Bechtle feel less secure than he put off, and then he connected with Sean Mitchell, whom he disliked as the embodiment of change at the school. This animosity was unreciprocated, as Juniper M. said that Mitchell wanted to be liked so that his tenure at the school would go as smoothly as possible. In pursuit of that smoothness Mitchell had been trying to meet up with Danielle Scott for insight as to how students in an arts-based environment thought, but Danielle S. said Scott was not giving Mitchell the time because of his temporary status. Despite her experience level, Scott was secretly intimidated by Bloom, who I decided was thoughtlessly very controlling, which justified her feelings. Finally, Bloom wanted Jenny Fairborn’s help with his daughters, but did not know how to ask for it given his position as a school counselor.
Play.

**Scene 1: The teacher meeting.** Mr. Mitchell has called us together to have a meeting about Michael, who is kind of a troubled kid despite his successful parents and well-adjusted siblings. He chased another 7th grade student with scissors yesterday, though frankly I had some concerns even before that because of the creepy pictures I know he collects. It’s disappointing really, because the reports from the school he was in before he started at The Indigo School this year spoke very highly of him. Bechtle thinks we should expel him because he doesn’t do the work and is disruptive to his class. Jenny is Michael’s soccer coach as well as his younger brother’s teacher, and she thinks it’s just the changes he has gone through that are affecting his behavior. I trust Jenny’s instincts with kids, and Danielle seems to agree with her, but the situation is hardly clear cut. We don’t want to be unfair to him of course, but we can’t have a school that is unsafe either, so it’s a bit of a sticky situation.

The introductory narrative described Michael’s school and family life, and while in the original script his siblings would have attended other schools, we decided that they went to The Indigo School along with their brother. This allowed for Bechtle to teach Michael’s sister, who we placed in 8th grade, and for Fairborn to teach his younger brother in 2nd grade. Because we wanted Bechtle to teach Michael, we placed both him and his classmate James in 7th grade. Each participant received a random narrative card that described an interaction between their character and Michael, information that might change their character’s point of view and that the players could work into the scene. Each card included questions to help flesh out the individual experience.
I asked who had gotten the card marked “aggression”, which described Michael’s assault on his classmate James. John Paul confirmed he had gotten it, and read it aloud for the other participants. The event the card described narratively triggered both Michael’s temporary suspension and the meeting we role-played this session.

Because my character, Bloom, tended to assume authority over his more experienced colleagues, I started the role-play for the meeting by welcoming everyone and touching on the issues from my Bloom’s perspective. Over the course of the meeting most of the information from the narrative cards emerged into the conversation, which provided points of intersection where our characters connected or diverged based on either their professional views or the relationships they shared. One notable exception was the card Jenny F. had drawn, which described how Michael had discussed with her his depressed state of mind and emerging identity as a homosexual. Jenny F. decided Fairborn would have told this to Scott, but that the two of them would not have shared it with other faculty because they did not want to “out” Michael. This knowledge affected their characters, and put them into a situation wherein they were more sympathetic and supportive of Michael than their colleagues, but these effects were “beneath the surface” of play. Bechtle and Mitchell, on the other hand, had a struggle that was more visible and vocal. Bechtle did not believe that Michael was the kind of student who belonged at the school based on how he perceived his behavior and work ethic, and was ready to immediately remove him, while Mitchell was trying to gain a sense of the whole situation to ensure his final decision would be as non-divisive as possible.
The result of their confrontation emphasized both the element of “pre-judging” each faculty member had applied as well as the incomplete nature of the picture they had of what occurred. Ultimately, Mitchell asserted his authority to have the faculty come up with a short-term plan, which Scott suggested would be for her to have a discussion with Michael and for Bloom to discuss matters with James.

This scene produced narrative effects that would come to play later in the game. Jenny F. added to the diegetic world when she stated that “Simon”, Michael’s younger brother who she taught, was a terrific student who looked up to his older brother. She also developed her character’s connections with the students by placing her as the soccer coach for the school, in which capacity she interacted with both Michael and James. John Paul’s Bechtle declared of Michael’s sister “Hayley is great”, and thus provided her name and the beginnings of a personality that would be built on in the next session.

During my introduction I had said (as Bloom) that I had heard a lot from James’ parents, but that Michael’s had not returned my calls, which foreshadowed our conceptions of the kind of parents they might be.

**Scene 2: Danielle Scott’s meeting with Michael. While I don’t think the meeting went great, at least we came out of it with a plan. Danielle volunteered to meet with Michael and discuss his behavior with him, which suited me fine. She seemed more likely to give the kid some latitude than I would, which would help him open up, though I worried that might also mean she would go too soft on him. We talked about it afterwards, and while he was (unsurprisingly) sarcastic and snippy with her, she at least got him to agree to come back and see her again.**
It sounds like what he mostly wanted in exchange was to have time to be left alone during the day, which in the short term was probably the best idea for everyone involved anyway. Of course, if he wants to stay at The Indigo School he will have to eventually be a part of the school community again, but one hurdle at a time.

The direction of our narrative required a player to assume the role of Michael, and John Paul volunteered for that role. We read all the narrative cards aloud, which included descriptions of Michael’s isolation, taunting, depression, collection of disturbing images, and aggression so that he was not lacking any information for his portrayal of the character. Danielle intended to have Scott talk to Michael’s siblings in a second meeting, though we only ended up enacting the first meeting. During that scene, three players functioned as a non-interactive audience while Danielle S. and John Paul role-played the interaction. John Paul’s Michael was quiet and hunched over, and clearly emotional. He repeatedly stated that he would do what Scott wanted him to, and that his feelings didn’t matter. He was sarcastic and angry, and completely believable to our group. Danielle’s Scott asked guiding questions, smiled, and encouraged the withdrawn young man to reach out to her, while he tested her boundaries, and tried to see how much freedom he could get from the system. Scott, as a representative of that system, negotiated some accommodations that seemed like they would both be healthy for Michael and encourage him to trust her yet further.
**Scene 3: Gerald Bloom’s meeting with James and Mrs. McComb.** Since I was already in contact with James’ mother I volunteered to talk to the two of them. At the time I thought I was getting the easier task because while James is a bit of a slacker, he isn’t what I would consider confrontational so much as clueless. This is because I forgot what a force of nature his mother can be. As sympathetic as I was to her point of view about Michael’s continued enrollment, I’m pretty sure the kid isn’t at a point where I would view him as a “monster”. I tried to keep the conversation focused on positives, like James’ opportunities for getting in a stronger academic position through our after-school programs, but in the end I had to agree to have Michael shadowed for Mrs. McComb’s peace of mind. Also to get her out of my office, because frankly that woman scares me.

James was an undefined quantity at this point, in that all we knew about him was that he and Michael did not get along, and that our characters perceived Michael as more intelligent and James as the more popular. James’ relative popularity was connected to the idea that he had been at the school since Kindergarten, while Michael was a relative newcomer whose acerbic wit meant that most people kept some distance from him. John Paul suggested that after Michael had landed some scathing remark on James, James had responded by calling Michael a “fag”. He reasoned that while the word didn’t have much weight for James, for Michael it was a very charged term, and he had reacted aggressively.
Juniper M. volunteered to play James and, since Jenny F. had not been in the previous scene either, she elected to assume the role of James’ mother. Because we were involving a parent we decided James needed a last name, which Juniper M. supplied as “McComb”. Other than having mentioned in the first scene that she was vocal and angry, there was no other discussion of what Mrs. McComb’s personality would be like before play started.

We decided the meeting had occurred three days after the end of Michael’s two-week suspension, and I began the meeting as Bloom speaking in a conciliatory manner. James, slouched and dismissive, was not happy to be in the meeting, and his mother’s first statement of “As far as I am concerned, I can’t believe my son is still in class with this monster” set the tone for how the meeting would proceed. By turns angry and offended, Mrs. McComb drew particular attention to the fact that she was paying for her son to attend The Indigo School while at the same time suggesting that Michael’s abilities were below what the school should be accepting. Bloom attempted to keep the focus on James’ education and what he needed to develop it further, but James quickly realized this could lead to more work for him and brought Michael’s “attack” back into the conversation. Mrs. McComb readily returned to the topic, and asked why people with “real power”, like the principal or Michael’s parents, were not present. To allay Mrs. McComb’s fears for her child’s safety, Bloom promised to have Michael shadowed for a week on the condition that the McCombs also return to the question of James’ studies at the end of that time.
Debrief. In reflecting on the experience, players focused on where they had drawn their characters from and on how goals, fears, and responsibilities had clashed together during the experience. In the most abstract sense, we found that there was a troubled area where what a community feels it needs to function effectively could be very much at odds with what an individual is needs. Most obviously this was associated with the likelihood of one middle-school boy antagonizing another, and that situation escalating to a point of violence. While that moment had impacted many people in our story, seen through the lens of experience the participants wondered what could have been done to stop it. Referencing our own lives we discussed the reactions teachers have, and about how when an altercation occurs we feel we are faced with a decision: make it a teachable moment by calling attention to it for the whole class, or find the time to work with one single student to show them why a problem exists.

In our role-played interactions relationships that included a discourse of power had always coexisted with some form of insecurity, and John Paul pointed out that this insecurity was more pronounced in the individuals who were supposedly dominant in those relationships. That insecurity was often translated into an aggressive stance. For example, we had tied Michael chasing James with scissors to the complex feelings of isolation and depression he was experiencing, even though these experiences happened “off-camera”. Likewise, Mrs. McComb’s desire to be seen as a “good mother” who protects her son meant that she entered into her meeting aggressively wielding the authority she had as both a parent and as a “consumer” of the product the school was selling.
The interaction with Mrs. McComb also interested our group because of how familiar she felt, and how much each we dreaded real-life interactions with parents who fit her mold.

**Session 2**

**Artifacts and pre-brief.** This was the first session in which we shared participant-created artifacts, which members of the community of play had crafted in a variety of media. Juniper M. sketched Sean Mitchell (Fig. 5), and included a “recipe” for what was required to create a character like him: “a pinch of Mr. R, a dash of assumption, one cup of sifted personal identity, and a heaping tablespoon of discretion. Serve with caution and prudence”. For her, the drawing was a reminder to be mindful of her assumptions about race and gender in our sessions, and that she would never achieve complete accuracy in her portrayal of someone so different from herself. Jenny F. had not created an artifact, but she described how Jenny Fairborn’s badge would be a shield behind which she would hide from her students and coworkers, even as it projected her authority. John Paul constructed the image of a Facebook page for Michael (Fig. 6) using Photoshop. He imagined what one of his own students would have made, from the profound to the cliché, and incorporated the description of the “disturbing images” Michael collects that had arisen in the previous session of play. In creating this page, he also gave Michael the last name of “Pearson”. Danielle S. created an abstract work that represented the idea that what is seen on the surface of a person fails to represent the many layers beneath that exterior (Fig.7), a point of view she shared with her character. She used Michael as an example, indicating the outermost red circle as an indicator of his rage and the darker interior as his sadness.
Figure 5: Sean Mitchell (Juniper M.)
Figure 6: Michael's Facebook page (John Paul)
Figure 7: People as layers (Danielle S.)
At the beginning of the pre-brief I shared an updated roster of characters from the school and asked Jenny F. to supply a first name for Mrs. McComb, which she declared to be “Janice”. Several members wanted to add a new superintendent to the roster, as they reasoned that W.R. Bechtle was much more likely to feel threatened by such a figure than an interim principal like Sean Mitchell. A question arose as to why Janice McComb would send her son to an art school when he showed no interest in pursuing the arts. We decided it would be both because of the prestige of the program and because James showed no interest in anything besides video games, so she hoped that the arts might connect to his interests to a path for his future.

As the pre-brief continued, we went a little more in depth into the reasons we had designed our characters the way we had. Much as Jenny F. drew on her professional experiences with parents to create Janice McComb, Juniper M. and John Paul had referenced individuals whom they knew in the creation of Sean Mitchell and Michael Pearson. The primary difference was that where Janice McComb was created to fill a space in the narrative, Mitchell and Michael were conceived as vehicles for exploring alternative perspectives as to why a student might act a certain way, or how an interim school principal might deal with the constant challenges to their ability to lead.

Both John Paul and Juniper M. were aware that the lives of the individuals they were drawing from to design their characters were not easy ones. John Paul said of his reference that “he is very much a middle schooler. He's in a place right now where he's not wanting to get things done, he doesn't see the future, he doesn't understand, and he's throwing some stuff away.”
I discussed how my own questions about what a different life might be like led to Bloom’s status as a widower with children, and how it reflected some fears and hopes I had after my wife had experienced a recent miscarriage.

After a moment of sympathy, we discussed aspects of the mechanics for character design in that while Michael’s character began as a collaborative construct produced from the dialogue of the teacher meeting, there was much less information about James other than a description of things Michael had done to him. It had created an interesting vacuum that Juniper M. had filled by modelling James off of a boy she had known years before in high school whom she thought might incite a person like Michael to violence. While James represented an opportunity for Juniper M. to gain insight into another perspective, her primary hope was that ultimately the character would realize or be held accountable for the impact of his actions. As she put it, “I might be looking forward to some retribution, even if I have to play that character”. She did not believe James, nor the person who she had referenced, were vindictive, but she did think they ought to be capable of recognizing how they thoughtlessly hurt other people.

**Workshop.** The workshop period again provided a warm-up and low-impact shared experience to continue the development of our community of play. Before attempting to experiment with any new meta-techniques I first described how they functioned mechanically and provided some examples of how they might be used. While I had made the meta-techniques available to participants in written form, I couched them in terms of my own experience and understanding to provide opportunities to challenge and modify the techniques into ones suited to our purposes.
**Monologuing.** I described this technique to the community of play as a point during a scene where the action stops and one person voices the unspoken thoughts in the character’s head. Normally it is something out of that player’s control, and is cued by another player via some signal such as pointing or the ringing of a glass. I referenced a variation I had seen played, wherein one person spoke in a monologue to describe a memory or thought (in the case I observed this was a parent talking about what they imagined after the death of a child), while other players silently mimed actions to accompany those words.

To experiment with the technique we decided the cue would be to point at someone while winking and make a “chk-chk” sound. John Paul suggested we could play as adults at a child’s birthday party. Juniper M. had been a face painter before at such parties, and decided to reprise that role for the workshop. I volunteered to be the father of the child whose birthday it was, and Jenny F. decided that she would be one of my buddies, “Brad”. John Paul adopted the role of my brother, “Uncle Steve”, and Danielle S. became the mother of one of the visiting children.

After roles were set, Juniper M. began the scene when she mimed painting the face of Danielle S.’s child. This action became the intersection around which conversation began, as characters critiqued the face-painter’s skill and suggested other entertainment that could have been hired. This segued into a vaguely defined adult “after-party” that the characters intended to hold. The monologues during the workshop voiced desires and concerns that the smiles and light conversations kept hidden.
In enacting the meta-technique we enjoyed testing our personal boundaries, which we often did solely for the purpose of making each other laugh.

**Bird-in-the-ear.** In the “bird-in-the-ear” technique, a player takes on the role of a voice inside the heads of one or more of the other characters, and what they say is meant to be incorporated into the actions those characters take. We constructed a situation wherein John Paul and Jenny F. were teenagers on a date at a movie, Juniper M. and Danielle S. played their mothers who sat in the row behind them, and I provided the voice of the bird-in-the-ear.

In this workshop my words tended to be heard as commands or truths rather than suggestions, which is not how the meta-technique normally functions. The workshop period helped to clarify that expectation, which I admitted I had failed to adequately explain. However, rather than prohibiting play the effect of this misunderstanding was to encourage participants to incorporate ideas they could not control into an evolving, multi-layered narrative.

**Play.** During this session we began to use the authoritative roles\(^{53}\) to divvy up responsibilities in the scenes, wherein each person agreed to fulfill a purpose that supported the community of play or the development of the narrative. I suggested we might use “the hot seat” to structure a scene, which is a meta-technique wherein a character is interviewed in order to further define the context to which they are connected.

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\(^{53}\) Described on page 136.
John Paul, who was in the “idea creator” role, suggested we use “the hot seat” to explore the introduction of changes to the school via administration in the form of an interview. The scene we decided to begin with was the initial interview between the school’s authorities and Sean Mitchell (as played by Juniper M.) for the position of interim principal.

**Scene 1: The Mitchell interview.** While I wasn’t at the first interview for Mr. Mitchell, it isn’t that hard to picture it. On one side you have the bigwigs jostling for position. Bob Stevens scowling his way to an ulcer, looking for a soldier to join him in his war on low test scores. He can be intimidating but Janice McComb, the head of the PTO, is not afraid of his bluster. No reason to be I guess, since he doesn’t sign her paychecks. And Bella Arturo, smiling that Buddha-like smile of hers even while she exits stage-left as our long-term head. I know despite her poise that she was worried that the arts would be cut the second she walked out that door. Oh, and Danielle Scott was there too, though I honestly think she only went so Bella would have another person in her corner. On the other side of the table you have Sean Mitchell, trying to navigate their egos, allay their fears, and offer the promises that would land him the job at our cozy little school. Say what you will about the man, but that must have been one hell of a juggling act.

The community of play discussed who would be in attendance for the meeting besides Mitchell. The first role to be suggested was that of the new superintendent, which John Paul volunteered to enact as Bob Stevens (who insisted his last name be pronounced “Stev-Ens”).
Since the parents would want to have a voice in the selection Jenny F. reprised her role of Janice McComb, who we decided was the head of the parent-teacher organization (PTO). We also decided that the faculty ought to have a representative, and Danielle S. played Danielle Scott for that purpose. Finally, I took on the role of the outgoing head of the school, Bella Arturo, who I said was retiring to spend more time with her grandkids.

We manipulated the environment slightly, placing Mitchell on the opposite side of the table from every other character in order to emphasize the “hot seat” mechanics. Jenny F. had chosen the authoritative role of “scene starter”, which we felt was fitting for Janice McComb’s character, and she began the interview by enthusiastically greeting Mitchell. The relationships between the characters and their goals, such as Stevens’ focus on test scores and commitment to “necessary change”, Janice McComb’s stance that passion and investment in the students were paramount traits for a head of school, or Scott’s choice to focus on her phone rather than on the person who was replacing a beloved colleague, were developed through responses to Mitchell’s answers for the various questions. Play continued until conversation moved away from development of individuals, at which point Juniper M. (as “scene ender”) called the action to a halt.

**Scene 2: Dinner in the Pearson household, pre-suspension.** Danielle works closest with Michael, but I know the Pearson family well enough to tell you a little about them. Typical American dream family really: Jim Pearson is a doctor and his wife Barb is in business, which is eternally the excuse they both give for not being able to make it to any of the meetings we try to schedule. So they are well off financially, and have the big house with the white fence, yadda yadda yadda, the whole nine yards.
Hayley is top of her class and blows everyone away in pretty much everything she does. As near as I can tell this includes taking care of her brothers too, though why she should have to take care of a 7th grade boy like Michael is beyond me. Simon has an excuse at least, since he is just in 2nd grade, and is frankly kind of adorable. I doubt she is too bugged by it anyway, since I never hear her complain. I saw them at the open house at the beginning of the year and they all looked very sharp, the picture of the kind of people we would want to join our family at The Indigo School.

I expressed a desire to the community of play to include more of the monologuing meta-technique we had played with in the workshop period, and John Paul suggested we turn it into a dinner table discussion for the Pearson family. John Paul played Michael again, and Jenny F. took on the role of his father, who she named Jim Pearson. Danielle volunteered to be Barb Pearson, the mother in the family, which left me to play Simon and Juniper M. to play Hayley (both of whom had been named in the previous session). Because Jim and Barb Pearson were both professionals, we decided they were Skyping in from their places of work to be with their children for dinner. This had the side effect of leaving Hayley in charge of the family and for actually making their dinner.

We simulated the experience by seating the three people playing children around a table while the people playing their parents sat some distance away, each behind their own table. As dinner began Michael was be playing video games and avoiding the experience until Hayley drug him in. Once he was at the table he began to mime playing a game on his phone, and arguments between Michael and Jim immediately erupted.
The scene that followed was at points humorous and often emotionally charged, as well as informative as to the individual and communal needs within the Pearson family.

When asked to monologue Juniper M. described Hayley’s feelings as “Hayley feels” rather than presenting them “in character”, describing her frustration at the amount of responsibilities she had versus the credit she felt she was given. The variation of third-person narration had the interesting effect of emphasizing the differences between the way a player saw the world and the way a character did. It also provoked a monologue from John Paul about Michael’s feeling that he was unimportant or unwanted. When I monologue as Simon I did so through his voice, which stressed the diegetic reality more than the experience of play. Doing so allowed me to say truths he believed but would not have said and hinted at his vague understanding of the tension in his family.

**Scene 3: Dinner in the Pearson household during suspension.** Of course, I imagine Michael being stuck at home has added some stress to the Pearson family. But I hope that maybe it will prove to be the wakeup call they needed! A little time together, a little forced reflection, and they could come out of this even stronger than before. That would be great, and would also help us as a school in figuring out what to do with Michael. If he comes back the same sullen kid as before, then I’m just not sure it would be in anyone’s interest for him to stay at The Indigo School.

Because the previous scene had been so effective and enjoyable, we decided to play a second scene that occurred just after Michael’s suspension began. John Paul defined it as Jim and Barb’s attempt to be better parents by forcing the family to gather around the dinner table, placing them physically in the same space as the children.
Because of the suspension, Jenny F. decided that Jim had declared that Michael no longer had access to his phone or video game systems. As the “scene starter” she began the action when she mimed passing food to Hayley along with light conversation about how their school day was. Given his suspension though, Michael took great offense to that topic.

During play characters tried to act like what they conceived of as “normal”, but this was challenged by conflict between the characters, especially Jim and Michael. Besides developing their relationships further it also added to the narrative, such as when Jim said that Michael had wanted to go to “that fancy art school”, or the fact that Hayley was achieving straight A’s that largely were perceived as a given. A monologue from John Paul emphasized that what the character heard, and how he would interpret what he heard, were distinct from what another character (or player) may have intended.

Eventually Hayley and Simon are excused from the table, and Michael engaged in a confrontation with his parents wherein they attempted to get him to explain himself and he tried to convince them that they would be best served by leaving him alone.

**Debrief.** The debrief for this session focused on how the interpretation of a situation affects our actions, as well as the idea that being aware of this link represented its own form of complication. Bob Stevens, for example, did not want to get rid of anything at The Indigo School, but was convinced that the attitude of the administration had been “Everything’s good. It's all great. Let's hug and play games.”
He believed that as a result, no real work was being done and test scores were slipping, which he perceived as a failure of the school to deliver a product worth having, and as a failure of leadership. In his view, the new leader of the school should be able to make “hard choices”, and follow through on them as necessary actions.

The scenes with the Pearson family suggested that they had cultivated the appearance of a happy family, with successful parents and three capable children. Our debrief described the inner workings of the relationships we had created, and illustrated where those assumptions failed. Michael’s willingness to point out that his family, while functional, was not healthy disrupted the façade of happiness that they had all constructed and maintained. This disruption was important for Michael because of the fact that so many people had accepted it despite its falsity, which made him question other “truths” that everyone accepted and lead to the terrifying worry that nothing in his world might be of any real value. John Paul reasoned that in Michael’s cynical world view, Jim’s was aggression towards him meant that it was likely that his father had hit his mother at some point (though the players thought this was unlikely). Michael loved Hayley, but resented her for being able to be who she was: the “perfect daughter”, a role that was not as comfortable as he presumed. Because Hayley desperately wanted for the illusion of her happy family to be true, she was growing to resent Michael as being unwilling to really be a member of the family and do his share. Since she assumed the difficulties in the family were between her parents and her brother, Hayley felt like she was responsible for the family’s ultimate “success” or “failure”, a situation that offered no chance of escape and little likelihood of reward.
Through it all Simon flew under the radar, getting whatever treats he requested so long as he continued to appear to be a trusting and innocent little boy.

Our community of play recognized that, as intense as our play had gotten, the situation the Pearson family was experiencing was not uncommon, and felt that we should not judge our characters too harshly. This understanding was heightened because many of the relationships we had played mirrored those from our own lives. Jenny F.’s portrayal of Jim Pearson was effective precisely because of this fact. In playing him she was attempting to portray a version of her own father, whom she described as a very militant and scary man who had ruled his family through fear. Danielle S.’s Barb harkened back to the player’s memories of her career driven father and stepmom, who often went on business trips and relocated the family frequently. Juniper M. connected with Hayley’s attempts to hold her family together, saying she found that children in non-functional families were the ones who most wanted it to be “normal”. The difficulty, as John Paul pointed out, was that the entire concept of “normal” was flawed to begin with, a misconception of what ought to be but for most people simply isn’t. What made it unhealthy wasn’t the way the families were actually structured, it was that they denied the issues they had in order to present themselves as “perfect” to outsiders.
Session 3

Artifacts and pre-brief. Juniper M. kicked off the artifact sharing this session with a scrapbook page she had created for Hayley (Fig. 8). We had a short impromptu discussion about her, John Paul saying that he felt he had several “Hayleys” in his class and me saying I loved how much we had discovered about her last session. The thoughtful and orderly (if emotionally intense) construction was especially interesting when contrasted with the Michael’s Facebook page from the previous week. Danielle S. had drawn up a character web for Barb (Fig 9.), informed by her reflection on the relationships we had seen develop around the Pearson dining table. A revelation for her that she held onto was how Barb’s life had not turned out as she had expected it would. Jenny F. did an oil pastel drawing (Fig. 10) that represented Jim Pearson’s perception of child rearing. Jim’s ideas about what his relationship with Michael should be, and still was with Simon, was represented by light areas and gentle curves. However something had changed and made that relationship sour to a point where he felt it could not be salvaged, a feeling shown by the black vortex in the center of the piece. John Paul found the piece especially insightful and important, as he felt it was very much like something that Michael would have created and that its existence highlighted the commonalities in the relationship between the two characters.
Figure 8: Hayley's scrapbook page (Juniper M.)
Talk segued into the themes from the previous week, specifically the façade of normality the Pearson family had constructed. John Paul described them as the family that goes to church together “on time, well-dressed” and “picture perfect”, but who begin arguing the second they are alone together. Juniper M. suggested that “school” and “church” might be interchangeable for the Pearsons, making Michael’s breach all the more upsetting as it exhibited what the family considered a private tension in public.
Figure 10: Jim's relationship with Michael (Jenny F.)
Jenny F. recalled when she was a teenager that she had been unkind to her mother (whom she professed to love) for reasons she couldn’t have explained even at the time, and so suggested it might be the result of the stage of life Michael was in. John Paul said it was more that Michael was struggling with feelings that were not “normal”, not “socially acceptable”, and that seeing himself as not being the “normal” he was supposed to be made being a part of the family his parents (specifically his father) envisioned impossible for him. Danielle thought that the geo-political environment of the school complicated this, since it was not very accepting of homosexuality. Juniper M. summed up how we imagined Michael felt when she said “He's not given any recourse, because he's not fitting in at home, and he's not fitting in at school.”

Because the subject had arisen, we talked further about sexuality and identity. One reason Jenny F. identified a need to have the discussion was that she felt her own identity as a heterosexual gave her a privileged view that made it difficult for her to conceive of what being a homosexual was like. Furthermore, despite the fact that two characters had known that Michael was beginning to think of himself as a homosexual, none of the characters had yet discussed that identity during the game. This occlusion was considered by the group to be true to how a high school experience would be, though the members who were full time teachers said they had noticed that there was a quality of “trendiness” to bisexuality in secondary environments. At the same time, the group noted that while it might be “trendy” it was not necessarily “accepted”.

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They also expressed a desire to entirely avoid conversation on the subject with students, because of a pronounced dislike of the idea that they would be telling a teenager who they are or are not allowed to be.

Juniper M. talked about how this avoidance problematizes education because it is difficult for principals, teachers, or parents to offer support to students when they cannot know about their internal struggles with any one of the multitudes of facets in their identity. Danielle S. added that even if we did know, they often represent subjects that we feel we must tiptoe around, even while we want to let the students know we are aware of their situation and to offer our assistance. Teachers always want to know their students said John Paul, but their multi-faceted existence means that we should always be aware that what we say or do has an impact that we will almost certainly be imperceptible to us. He suggested Michael probably had a handful of teachers that knew him well, generally teachers who treated him like fellow lovers of knowledge rather than as a subservient being, but that it was unlikely they were aware of the struggle that for him was a very large part of his life, and which was affecting every relationship he had.

The tension for Michael had become housed in a series of beliefs about his worth. According to John Paul, he believed that if he were to disappear that nobody would notice. Not that he should end his life, but that he existed as a non-entity that had little impact on the world. Danielle S. had struggled with depression herself, and confirmed that this was something that could well be felt. Furthermore, John Paul said that Michael felt his personal struggles were harming people he cared about in a kind of uncontrolled exercise of power.
Michael had reasoned that if he were absent, those people would be free to do something better with their time. In the case of Hayley, for instance, she would no longer be forced to accommodate the impact of his actions into her own hectic life. This was true of his relationships with faculty as well, though Jenny F. pointed out that the person who was working with him, Danielle Scott, was obligated to do so. This would inhibit Michael’s willingness to trust her or to see her as trying to help him, as he would almost certainly feel she was trying to force him to be “normal” for the benefit of the school.

One interesting idea that arose out of the discussion of power and relationships was how much Simon, Michael’s younger brother, affected Michael’s perspective. While on the surface Simon had very little power, we realized that what he really lacked was authority because he was not in a position to see others do what he said by virtue of his age, occupation, or social position. However, he did have the ability to influence other family members, either because they felt affection for him as Michael did, because he was seen as their responsibility as he was for Hayley, or because he was seen as a good spirited and innocent child in a family that was feeling tension, as he was for his parents. Even the members of the community of play themselves found the character likable.

The discourse of power as expressed in a system found a parallel in game mechanics and the ways the characters had developed. Jenny F. felt like the relationship between Michael and his father was very realistic and commonplace, though she suspected that was partly because Jim Pearson was much like her own father, and she liked that in developing that relationship they had constructed the idea that Jim and Michael would react very similarly when they felt threatened or pushed.
Danielle S. had not based Barbara Pearson off of anybody, but while creating her character web she had found that she had unintentionally created a lot of parallels to her own life. This created a situation wherein she learned more about the character while also reflecting on the personal experiences she had drawn from.

**Workshop.** The techniques we experimented with for this workshop emphasized improvisation that emerged through discourse, and had a very active and social feel to them.

**Voices in the head.** For our first workshop, we used the “voices in the head” meta-technique\(^{54}\) to play a scenario wherein a young person, Danielle S., was thinking of moving away from Columbus. The other four of us played the arguments for places she might move to: Chicago (Jenny F.), Cincinnati (Me), New York (Juniper M.), or not moving at all (John Paul). We referred to ourselves in the exercise as “I” or “we”, since we were effectively all playing the same person. During the game we spontaneously introduced an aged family dog, a best friend, a mother, experiences we had already had, and experiences we wished we could have. Danielle S. clapped her hands to end the conversation and told us what she thought of each option, ultimately opting for the safe but different choice, Cincinnati. An interesting side effect of this workshop is it gave us a chance to show what we knew about the locales we represented, describing them for players as well as characters.

\(^{54}\) See p. 131.
“It didn’t happen like that!” This meta-technique was meant to present an unstable narrative, where players are interrupted by one another while telling a story. I began the workshop with historical trivia about WWII female pilots and navigators from Russia, what the German soldiers called the “night witches”. The story grew increasingly fantastic, and culminated when Danielle S. assumed an aged sounding voice and said how she and her comrades had “really done it”. Danielle suggested we apply the “it didn’t happen like that” to develop the story about what had happened between Michael and James, and John Paul suggested that James should be present for that interaction. Juniper M. agreed and made it clear that he had no idea what had set Michael off, since he did not see the word “fag” (which he had said to Michael) as a charged term.

Play.

Scene 1: The 7th grade lunch table. James doesn’t seem to be having trouble returning to his everyday routine, probably thanks to his solid social group. I have seen him back at the lunch table with his friends, Joel the smartass and Cory the artist-jock. Kind of an odd trio if you ask me, but I guess that is one of the results of going to school together since Kindergarten. I get the impression James is dating Tricia, since she and her “BFF” Ava are sitting over by him now, though I know she used to be with Cory and I suspect Joel has a thing for her. Oh god, I sound like a housewife addicted to a cheesy soap opera. Mostly they gossip about the news around the school, mashing up details until they bear zero resemblance to the truth.

55 See p. 130.
I’m pretty sure I heard Tricia claim Michael had stabbed James, but that got shut down by her classmates pretty quick. Summer can’t come quick enough for them or me I think.

Participants chose authoritative roles based on what they wanted to play or randomly, their preference. Going into this scene, Juniper M. expressed a hope that it might lead to James working out why Michael had gotten upset. We constructed quick identities with which we could have the discussion, except Juniper M. who played as the more developed James McComb. John Paul played James’ girlfriend, Tricia Jones, and sat down beside Juniper M. John Paul placed Jenny F., who was playing Tricia’s “ditzy” best friend on his other side. I played Joel Gates, who I described as a tall and nerdy smartass, and sat across from James. Danielle S. played Cory Smith, and she said was an artist and a jock, and sat across the table from Ava.

The placement of the characters was not entirely arbitrary, as it represented the current nature of their relationships and the discourse of power between the characters. This discourse was further developed as we interrupted narratives and challenged one another. Cory kept suggesting Michael was misunderstood, Joel suggested it had all been an accident, Tricia tried to portray things as much more extreme than anyone knew, Ava downplayed the events importance as compared to the latest television shows, and James strove for the support of his friends and some semblance of truth. Throughout the experience Tricia exercised her power by texting Ava constantly (though what the player actually texted Ava’s player was the phrase “blah blah blah” repeatedly). Once we realized the narrative was going in circles without producing more narrative or character development we called it to a stop.
Juniper M. was disappointed it had not given more resolution to James, but she reasoned the opportunity might arise in a conversation yet to come.

**Scene 2: The faculty room.** The one place in the school I’m supposed to be allowed to just be myself, and even it isn’t free from politics. When I come in to the teacher’s lounge from the politics of dealing with a helicopter parent, I get confronted by the politics of school testing. You’ve got your faculty politics as Bechtle plops his farmer-boots on the table we eat on, and I have to tell him to move because nobody else will stand up to the old goat. And then, of course, the politics of teaching in the form of how the school deals with Michael and what those decisions say about us. Politics, politics, politics, blah, blah, blah! I just want to nuke my pizza, sip my Coke, and decompress!

Jenny F. was the “idea generator”, but in constructing the next scene she asked the group for advice on what the narrative was lacking. I responded that we had not seen much of our initial cast of faculty members, and Danielle suggested we place them in the teacher’s lounge. This put us around a table with people eating again, but as Jenny F. said “a lot of things happen over food!” Other than Juniper M. the players reprised their earlier roles: Danielle S. as Danielle Scott, Me as Gerald Bloom, John Paul as W.R. Bechtle, and Jenny F. as Jenny Fairborn. Because we decided Sean Mitchell wouldn’t have been in the lounge, Juniper M. played an art teacher named Ms. Morningstar who didn’t teach Michael but who had heard about him from one of the other art teachers.
I left the room for so that Bloom would come into a conversation already in progress, adding to verisimilitude, and Scott and Fairborn began to gripe about PARCC testing (which the players had been discussing before the session began that night). When Bloom came in he had just gotten off the phone with Janice McComb, who had a new round of complaints. The scene included moments of confrontation, such as when Bloom and Bechtle argued about Bechtle putting his feet on the table, but mostly centered on discussions about the other members of the community and how they were performing in those roles. This discussion touched on parents, questions about James and Michael and whether either of them belonged at the school, and about the changing leadership in the school. The scene mirrored the first scene we played in session one, however Bloom’s candor and uncertainty when he said of Michael “We want him to go to a place that is right for him, but we can’t even figure out what is right for him here” felt markedly different than the plan for communication they had ended the faculty meeting with. It was less productive, but perhaps more honest.

Scene 3: Inside of Michael’s head. My girls want me to take them to this new Disney movie when it comes out called “Inside Out”. Apparently the idea is that all of us have all these little personalities running around in our head, which looks like some kind of spaceship according to the animators, and that how we act is the direct result of these little guys arguing and acting. Challenges a lot of my notions of free will, but not a bad afternoon out for our family I guess. It got me wondering about our older students at The Indigo School though.
God knows it isn’t easy to be a teen, and some of those kids have real problems. What it feel like to be locked inside one of their minds, instead of inside a cartoon where we all knew it would turn out alright?

Juniper M. suggested that since we had played through a scene wherein James was confronting his situation, if somewhat inconclusively, that we could have one wherein Michael dealt with the same situation. I suggested we use the “voices in the head” meta-technique, and John Paul agreed on the basis that it seemed unlikely that the character would open up to people outside of his head. Danielle S. opted to play Trust to encourage Michael to talk to counselors and to seek help. Jenny F. played Depression, and suggested that someone else ought to be Anger, which I agreed to play. Given our pre-brief talks we also felt Guilt should be present, and Juniper M. took that role for herself. We cleared the floor of all props except for one chair for Michael to sit in, and I dimmed the lights so that the room was only barely lit.

What followed was very intense play, with each player using exaggerated traits in relation to Michael and one another (loudness, closeness, movement) to convey the essence of the emotion. Trust sat close to Michael and whispered to him while Anger paced, yelled, and cursed. Depression walked quietly in the opposite direction of Anger and used the words of others to lash out, while Guilt stood close by Michael and reminded him of all the people he had let down. When the play had reached a particularly emotional pitch Juniper M. asked that we stop, and we did so immediately and without hesitation.
Debrief. The debrief for this session was extensive because we had played in three distinct environments and because the play had felt intense, which gave us a lot of ideas and emotions to work through. The first experience was informative as to what we, as teachers, perceived as “normal” and “healthy”. While we our sympathies lay with Michael in the narrative we constructed, the distance he put between himself and others was a factor we thought of as endangering to him. Contrariwise, we perceived James as an antagonist because of his verbal assault on Michael when he thoughtlessly called him a “fag”, even though James did not understand what he had done wrong. However, despite his reckless use of language James was in what teachers might have thought of as the “right place”, with a strong social network and the realization that their relationships would be changing once he went to high school. The lunch table scenario also highlighted that the community of play felt a growing need for some sort of narrative resolution to our efforts, though the game had been designed to experiment more with thematic concerns. We decided to bear this in mind for the scenarios we anticipated would be played in the next session.

Discussion about the teacher break room scene touched on how the amount of gossip we had role-played felt uncomfortably realistic, though Jenny F. said her own school tended to have conversations that avoided the students as much as possible and tended towards domestic subjects such as who was having children or purchasing a house. Juniper M. said that she knew that gossiping in those spaces led to teacher burnout, but she also said that focusing solely on positive subjects felt unnatural.
This seemed to be because the space juxtaposed the identity of being a “teacher”, expected to act and talk in certain ways, with that of being an “independent adult”, who was (in theory) free to be their own person. John Paul described this as a tension that existed between the emotional need for socialization, especially for art teachers who tend to be isolated in their schools, and the risk of becoming embroiled in toxic social interplay.

Another aspect of that scene was the role gender had played in the discourse. When Bloom and Bechtle had a short fight for dominance, which Juniper M. called “a very male thing”, they had both gotten very loud. Bechtle’s player John Paul hadn’t noticed it at the time, and the female players found themselves automatically quieting down in a way that we identified as evidence of embedded patriarchal attitudes. This lead to a discussion of participant experiences with male colleagues in the break room and how it was common for them to be very quiet or absent. John Paul and I regarded this as the result of feeling intimidated by the number of female colleagues present. Danielle S. suggested that the tendency towards subjects relating to motherhood and domesticity might also have represented gendered conversation that shut men out, which John Paul agreed with in very strong terms.

The lack of male educators, especially in art, was something that we agreed was an issue. Jenny felt like it created a lack of balance in the school, and wished that more men would go into education.
However, she also cited her boyfriend’s experiences from when he’d been an education major and found that it wasn’t socially acceptable for him to want to work with children, despite the affection he felt for them and his attempts to present himself in as non-threatening a manner as possible. The community saw this play out in licensure programs, which participants recalled as having very few men and even fewer representatives of people of color.

The scene wherein we enacted emotions in Michael’s head was referred to as “feeling real”. Juniper M. said that the thoughts seemed similar to ones she had felt before, and that “to hear it and see it enacted is kind of bizarre, and disturbing, and really cool!” Jenny F. noted that the players who had embodied emotions had incorporated their identities into their movements and tones of voice, giving the experience a surreal quality. During the scene I had taken off my shoes, quieting my heavy tread and letting me feel the texture of the carpet. This affected John Paul’s perception of how Anger was represented, casting it as a sudden rage that could come from anywhere, as opposed to Trust who was always quietly close by.

This interaction was also interesting in that it had four characters, the emotions, pointed specifically at affecting a fifth, John Paul’s Michael. He said that when the scene had begun he had intended to talk to the emotions, but as play continued he felt like he needed to be quiet because “all this stuff was almost too much. I couldn't grasp it. I couldn't interact with all of them. So I couldn't interact with one of them.”
Juniper M. speculated that struggling with strong emotions was central to understanding what it felt like to be in middle school, and suggested that the control adults tended to believe they were capable of by comparison was a bit of a self-delusion. John Paul had found that Anger and Trust were so polarized that they cancelled each other out, which left Michael focusing on what Guilt’s reminders of his failures and Depression’s use of those experiences to cut him down. Though Danielle S. suggested that trust might be insidious and might blossom later given the right circumstance, the result in the present was the feeling of a spiral that went further and further into depression.

The experience provided the community of play with a shared understanding of Michael’s internal feelings, which we used to suggest some possibilities for our next session of play. We reasoned that the game afforded was the opportunity to narratively endanger the characters from a position of safety for the players, and that this would be important because the only circumstances we thought would likely cause Michael to lose control of his emotions would be through physical contact. The specific circumstances of that contact, whether this was intentional rough-housing during a soccer-match or an accidental bump of the shoulder while walking through the hallway, were not important. What was important was that this release seemed likely to provide a narrative climax or the possibility of resolution, which the community wanted to aim for.
Session 4

**Artifacts and pre-brief.** This session was atypical because John Paul was unable to attend. He had the action summarized, was given access to the documentation of the debrief, and submitted his artifacts electronically for others to view\(^5\), but his absence made a palpable difference. For the artifacts, Danielle S. had done a drawing (Fig. 11) based on the “what’s in your head?” scene with Michael from the previous session. The yellow layer represented who Michael truly was, and the colors of the emotions that were laid over top obscured that layer and changed how it was perceived. Danielle S. had intentionally worked the media to be frenetic in appearance to describe the frustration Michael was feeling, and the star in the center of the piece acted like a vortex that pulled Michael forward.

Jenny F. said that her tempera painting (Fig. 12) described one of the big “take-aways” for the experience as a whole, which was the far-reaching influence of one person’s actions. While she had been aware of this idea before, experiencing it had offered a distinctly different conception of what that meant. The person in the image could be anybody, not specifically Michael, and the purple lines that emanated from the figure indicated the purposeful ways in which it influenced the world. The multitude of other lines represented influence the figure had on other people that it was unaware of.

\(^5\) Though these were submitted after the session, and thus not discussed, they have been included here to group them with other reflections from the previous session.
Figure 11: Michael's emotions (Danielle S.)
Juniper M.s’ drawing (Fig. 13) illustrated how she pictured Michael: by himself, and as “a round peg that doesn’t fit in anywhere.” Around him are the things that he thinks *should* be: a world with a nice white house, in which he's getting good grades, and in which he is heterosexual.
Figure 13: Round peg, square hole (Juniper M.)
John Paul submitted two pieces electronically after the end of this session. The first image (Fig. 14) is a torn page from Michael’s sketchbook that John Paul says W.R. Bechtle found in his classroom, probably after Michael threw it towards the trash can but missed. To Bechtle the image proves his suspicions that Michael needs psychiatric help, so he kept it as evidence and sent a scan of it to the guidance counselors. The second image (Fig. 15) is a picture of Michael as a filter that “takes bullcrap miasma and condenses it, pressurizes it, and spits out bullcrap sludge”. John Paul says that while Michael “believes he is good at separating bullcrap and finding truth” there is little difference between the gaseous and the solid waste in the image, and that Michael is not as profound as he thinks he is.

We discussed our previous session, and returned to the question of how important closure was. Given John Paul’s absence and our reluctance to have anyone else play Michael we knew that some of the interactions we thought might lead to closure were not going to occur, so the question seemed particularly relevant. One reason Juniper M. suggested it mattered so much to her was that she had emotionally invested in the characters, and had built them in part on her own experiences. She especially felt this about James McComb, since she had conceived of him as being a vehicle for seeing a person from her past own up to his actions.
Figure 14: Torn page from Michael's sketchbook (John Paul)
James’ experience in the previous session had not led to much progression of plot because he still had no idea why Michael had chased him, but there had been progression of character in the sense that we had a fuller sense of who James was and we knew that his not knowing the reason mattered to him greatly. Jenny F. said that it was human nature to want to have conclusions, but that they rarely occurred in life in a manner that is not artificial. Danielle S. said that it depends on how you define a conclusion, which at some level is always arbitrary because “we go on”.

Figure 15: Michael’s portrait as a filter (John Paul)
While recognizing that it was distinct from closure, I suggested that aiming for a cathartic moment for a member of the community of play or for a character might fill that role for us. This was acceptable, but Jenny F. pointed out that those moments tended to be internal and that she had found that interactions that justified your emotions towards someone were exceedingly rare. Rather than expecting someone to come to you and say “I’m sorry” she said that it had to come from within, through reflection and alteration of one’s own life.

In speaking of reflection, I asked the community to talk about what “feels real” about the games. I did so in part because that was how several players had described the “what’s in your head?” scene, despite the essentially unreal situation of a person being literally surrounded by emotions. Danielle S. said that the emotions were a common, identifiable element that we all shared, and suggested that for some people having your emotions literally screaming at you was a part of their daily lives. This sounded reasonable, though we had intensified the effect through our interaction. I suggested that what made it feel more real may have been that we had removed Michael’s ability to control or hide from his own emotions. Jenny F. said this was suited to working with middle-school aged characters, who lose control of both their bodies and their emotions.

Because the subject of control had come up, we discussed the manner in which characters had been generated and developed. The game had been designed so that Michael began play with a lot of impact, but the fact that he was defined by the teachers in the first meeting meant his player had the least agency in his design.
The “ball of yarn” meta-technique we had used in the first session had also restricted player agency in character design, but that restriction had created a narrative point for the characters and context to evolve from. Juniper M. referred to working without this structure, as most of us we had for the 7th grade lunch table scene and as she had for her teacher in the lounge, as “a blank page”. She described that experience as being intimidating and strange, especially when everyone else in the scene was more or less developed than the character she was playing.

We returned to the question as to whether or not we wanted to define Michael’s ethnicity and appearance, and opted to leave him as a character that players created individual constructs of in their minds. This allowed Michael to represent anybody, which made him more relatable. As a result of this decision, the entire Pearson family went undefined in those same terms. This was not problematic for me because when I pictured Hayley in my mind I just pictured Juniper M., but Jenny F. challenged me and asked if I pictured John Paul when I imagined Tricia Jones, and I had to admit that I did not. Juniper M. said that she had found the experience of being a woman playing a teenage boy who was dating a teenage girl played by a man felt strange to her, especially as the scene went on. The rest of the group talked about Juniper M. how this ambivalence had come through in her role-playing, and had made her portrayal of a teenage boy trying to look and act like he thought he “ought to” exceptionally effective.
Workshop. We had begun the session feeling a little low on energy due to our missing member, so the high energy and comedic aspects of the workshop proved very useful for warming up together.

Remember when…? There were two meta-techniques I wanted to introduce and play with, and “Remember when…?” seemed likely to create play most conducive to warming up, so we started with it. For this meta-technique, participants enact a scene that continues until one player says “Remember when…?” and then sets up a flashback scene that would have occurred before that scene. Players then enact the flashback to a point of conclusion before returning to the first scene, allowing characters to comment on the flashback. It requires characters that have shared a common experience, and is good at filling out details for a context our setting.

Jenny F. immediately suggested we play alligator hunters, as seen on the show Swamp People. Juniper M. had not seen the show and was unfamiliar with the idea, so she volunteered to play a cousin from New York City who had little understanding of the context. Jenny F. played an old patriarch who led the group, I opted to be a “big and dumb” person who worked for him, and Danielle S. said she would play his son. Juniper asked if she should be a boy, and Jenny F. responded, “We are all men here!” We then set up a square of chairs so that we could pretend we were on a swamp boat.

The exaggerated accents and movements we enacted inspired laughter, and after a short time before Jenny F. called “Eh, Bubba… you membah da time we caught dat thirteen footah?” We quickly decided that Juniper M.’s character would be the one to actually kill the alligator in the flashback because we thought it would be funny.
What followed was a moment of frenetic energy as we scrambled around while Juniper M. pointed an imaginary rifle in every possible direction before “shooting”, and then looking on in horror as we dragged the imaginary carcass into the boat. We flashed back to the present day with us all seated quietly and reminiscing about what that experience had meant to our characters, whether it was horrible, memorable, or profitable.

**Locked eyes.** The idea behind the “locked eyes” meta-technique is that players keep themselves focused on one another’s eyes during an interaction. The technique is used to encourage intimacy between characters, and often to simulate affection, so we had some hesitancy about trying it. Therefore it was made clear from the start that if any member felt uncomfortable then we would immediately stop the workshop, and nobody would be judged for it. Because the technique is normally used for two players we stuck to scenarios that split us into pairs, and Danielle S. had the idea that we could be prisoners and their visitors. After a bit of discussion, we decided both conversations would occur simultaneously for the purposes of creating a closer simulation.

We played “rock, paper, scissors” and used the matching symbols to decide who would be in each group: Juniper M. with Danielle S., and Jenny F. with me. I suggested we make it a women’s prison and the other players agreed. Jenny F. specifically asked that I play her mother and Juniper M. and Danielle S. decided to play sisters. Because we would each be occupied in our own conversations I set an alarm to interrupt and end play after a few minutes. We placed a table between that put the prisoners (Danielle S. and myself) facing our visitors while all four members held imaginary phones.
The conversations that followed were about perceived and avoided responsibilities, both from the prisoner and the visitor, imagined and improvised through conversation. Though the locked-eyes created a good connection between the characters, the comedic tone we included kept it from becoming too uncomfortable. However, that tone was disruptive in that it was hard not to eavesdrop and laugh at the other couple. Juniper commented that the physical separation between the characters caused by the table helped make the technique feel safe and accessible to her, and that the imaginary distance created by the glass between her character and that of her partner also helped her envision their imaginary closeness. Because we had all had trouble keeping our eyes locked, we did a comparative experience wherein we switched partners and tried to stare without talking for about a minute. It was difficult not to giggle or want to talk during that time, but Jenny F. found that imagining herself drawing her partner’s face helped her stay focused.

**Play.** We discussed using the authority roles for this session, but decided that we had reached a point as a community of play wherein we did not need or want to have specific people given specific duties any more. Danielle S. suggested that since John Paul was not there we could have Michael’s parents, Jim and Barb Pearson, meet with the principal, Sean Mitchell, to decide what the “next step” for Michael would be. We also decided to use the “remember when…?” meta-technique to see what the school was like when Bella Arturo ran it versus how it was with Sean Mitchell in charge.
Scene 1: Graduation day. I thought we would never make it! Mr. Mitchell has seen us through well enough, though not with the inspirational fire Bella was supposed to have had in her prime. We all still have our heads though, and that’s something. He’s decided to move on though, so we are back to a bit of instability for next year again. I thought about trying for the position myself, but I don’t think I quite have his chops for juggling personalities yet. I told Danielle that she should run instead because she is capable, has great roots in the community, and has a good handle on the kids. Heck, I kind of want to see if she can even help me out with my girls. I think she just needs to be more aggressive in putting herself forward. Plus, Janice McComb said she might apply for the position too, and that is a future too terrible for us mere mortals to contemplate.

We decided to do the different principals first because it seemed likely that the confrontation with the Pearsons would provide as much of a conclusion as we were likely to get. Juniper M. pointed out we should have a strong contrast between the two times, and Jenny F. said that if we played the same yearly event then the differences should be notable. We decided to play through the graduation of the 8th grade class, with just the head of school and the students placed on the stage. Because Danielle Scott had been present for both administrations, Danielle S. wanted to play her in both present time and in the flashback, and Jenny F. decided to play Janice McComb as the head of the PTO in both circumstances as well. Juniper M. started play as Sean Mitchell, and during the flashback switched to playing Frank McComb, who she created to fill the role of Janice McComb’s husband. I began play as Gerald Bloom, sitting beside his colleague Danielle Scott, and switched to playing Bella Arturo for the flashback.
Mitchell said that he would not be returning during his speech, and Bloom suggested he might apply for the job of head of school. Neither Scott nor Janice McComb seemed to like the idea so I dropped it shortly before Scott said “Remember when Bella was in charge at graduation?” and we switched places. I portrayed Arturo more energetically than I had previously, and the other players pointedly paid more attention to her than they had to Mitchell. When I reached the end of her speech we moved back to the Mitchell era, but Juniper M. decided to stay as Frank McComb so that she could actively participate in the conversation. Once play resumed Bloom suggested that Scott’s experience and knowledge of the students would make her a good principal, and hinted that I could use her help in understanding my daughters. Janice gave long rant to her husband about how she wanted to see leadership at the school that would champion the arts and give their son more things to put on his resume, and Frank suggested in exasperation that she apply for the position of principal. Janice immediately grew visibly excited about the prospect and shared it with the counselors, who desperately tried to dissuade her. The scene ended when we pretended Mitchell had stopped speaking, and we all stood to applaud.

**Scene 2: Final meeting with the Pearson parents.** Mr. Mitchell asked me to join him for the meeting with Jim and Barb Pearson about what would be best for Michael next year. This meant I got to experience the simple joy of having parents on both sides of an issue telling me that I was incompetent. Mr. Mitchell and I had decided to be firm about confronting Michael’s issues with them, but they reacted as if we were attacking them.
Honestly, if they can’t accept that Michael is not functioning in The Indigo School I have to question how well they really know their children. One thing I do agree with is that Barb wanted for Danielle to have been there. Not because I think she would have had more information to add like Barb did, but because she is much better at keeping a cool head when confronted by the angry villagers. The more I think about it, the more I hope she takes up my suggestion to go for the principal job next year.

For the final scene, we modified the locked eyes meta-technique so that rather than focusing on one other person for the whole time we would try to keep looking at the eyes of whomever we were speaking to at the time. Jenny F. and Danielle S. reprised their roles as Jim and Barb Pearson and sat opposite of Juniper M. and myself as Sean Mitchell and Gerald Bloom. So that Juniper M. did not have to start the scene again I volunteered to begin, which was in keeping with how Bloom’s character had acted in the first session.

The meeting scene that resulted was powerful and tense. It was interesting that both Sean Mitchell and Barb Pearson were played as being more forceful than they had been portrayed before, and also that Jim and Barb formed a united front in the meeting, whereas they had argued in the domestic scenes. Voices were raised, accusations were leveled, and threats were produced from both groups, and at the end of it the Pearsons angrily stormed out after angrily threatening to remove all three of their children from the school.
Debrief. The debrief focused on the interactions of “authorities”, and touched on how having an absent member affected play. John Paul’s absence provided a disruption that let us observe some of the inner workings of our community of play in more detail. Most obviously, we were aware of the absence of a friend with whom we had shared several experiences of play with. We found that the number of players affected our ability to perform particular scenes, sometimes making them easier and at other times harder, which was particularly noticeable because of the small group size we normally had. For example, the graduation scene might not have worked as well if we had spread the chairs out more, and our Swamp People workshop would have been difficult because it would have placed too many people in our “boat” to be believable, while the larger meetings and complex family dynamics we had enacted in earlier sessions would have been much harder to work with. Play would still be enjoyable whether a member was present or not, but it also could not help to have been different. The group also felt the absence of what Jenny F. referred to as John Paul’s “more male energy”, which she described as being decisive and “respectfully assertive”. Because of these traits John Paul was perceived as the member of our community who was most likely to suggest ideas, and in his absence Danielle S. found she attempted to contribute more to help create what she saw as “balance”.

The graduation scene provided an opportunity to see faculty interactions wherein they asked for, offered, or received support from one another.
Bloom had accepted that he was not in a good position to be the principal, but the nature of his personal view as an assertive and empowered individual meant that he perceived it as a possibility for Scott, and led to him suggest she go beyond her comfort zone to seek the position for herself. On the other hand, Bloom’s continuing difficulty with his daughters was difficult for him to express directly, and while he believed Jenny Fairborn could help him the opportunity never seemed to arise. So when he hinted to Scott that it would be nice to have her help, it was a combination of trust in her support, the opportunity the conversation had presented, and the (admittedly understated) admission that his colleague may be able to speak to something he couldn’t. It was difficult for him to be more direct, because to do so would have run counter to Bloom’s self-image. As Juniper M. stated, “I don’t even know how he would ask for help on that.”

Janice McComb’s role, and the changes it might go through, also presented a unique avenue of exploration. Because she was not accountable to the administrative hierarchy of the school, Janice had exhibited a tremendous ability to influence the direction the school was headed with relatively little accountability. The community of play felt this influence relied on her “outlier” status, and thought it was unlikely that she realized how much freedom to use (and abuse) that influence she would lose if she succeeded in becoming principal. Another side effect of her current role was that, since the position was separate from the internal hierarchy of the school, that hierarchy could be cast as an “other” to be combatted or overthrown.
This was the stance Janice McComb had taken in every interaction with faculty, that they were deficient in the standards that she had set and had to be put to rights, and her desire at the of the scene to become the new principal represented a progression of her thinking.

Janice’s quest for power originated in her desire to protect her son and to have a say in his development. Essentially, Jim and Barb Pearson wanted the same things for Michael, and so they felt it was important that they stand their ground and present a united front. Danielle S. said that during the scene she went for a show of strength early on, because she reasoned that Barb would be prepared to fight for her child. Because of this stance, criticism of family members felt like an attack of the family as a whole, and their parenting in particular. This feeling was exacerbated because the way the meeting was structured seemed to be intended to throw the parents on the defensive, where they would have preferred collaborative language that started by asking them what they believed was best for Michael. Because it felt like the administration had reached a decision in advance of the meeting, the parents felt that their agency as parents was being taken from them. In their perspective, this disregarded their knowledge of their child and failed to credit their identities as working parents.

Furthermore, the assumption that the school did not understand them or their child led to a conviction that the school was not invested in their child, and without proof of any form of investment they couldn’t perceive the school’s point of view as being “fair”. Jenny F. said that during the scene Jim began to think that it might actually be best for Michael to leave the school and pursue some alternatives, and to provide access to activities outside of school to encourage him to have stronger social relationships.
However, by that point Jim wasn’t going to give an inch because of the assumptions he felt had been made and the disrespect that had been shown to his family.

The perspective from the other side of the table was considerably different, starting with the notion that Mitchell and Bloom had to do what was “best” for the school as their first responsibility. This was defined for Mitchell as doing what he thought would satisfy what Janice McComb, Bob Stevens, and W.R. Bechtle thought of as “best”, which Danielle S. pointed out was unlikely to be what the Pearson family thought was best for Michael. Juniper M. and Danielle S. agreed it was what would be easiest to ask Michael to not return, and the system certainly seemed to encourage that avenue, but it didn’t account for the specific needs of a student who was already struggling with a lot of changes. A large part of the issue from the administrative side is that they had to make assumptions about what Michael might do based on what he had already done, and the safe choice for them was to expect the worst in the future. Juniper M. pointed out that, even if Michael were allowed to stay, his teachers would feel responsible for keeping an eye on him, which would have made him a passive impediment to the education of the other students in the educational community. Danielle S. noted that resorting to the extreme consequence of removal for a single instance was something that was hardly “fair”, but I shared my point of view that the governing body of an independent school tends to believe that individuals that present them with difficulties will flourish in a different context. Therefore to send the student elsewhere would be not just in the school’s interest, but that of the student as well. It was my opinion that this belief is not necessarily wrong, but that it is far too easy to confuse what is easy, and what is right.
The other problem with this stance is that it can create a situation wherein the administration feels like they are the final authorities, and that they ought to be listened to without question. When educators believe parents have given them reason to think that they haven’t taken the role of education for their child seriously, as had happened with the Pearson parents due to their difficulty finding time to speak with the faculty, the resulting impression that the parents don’t care about their child’s future leads to frustration on the part of the educator. This frustration can come out in the form of preconceived judgments about the parents, or the use of language that exacerbates the situation, as happened when Sean Mitchell questioned if Michael was a good role model for Simon. Even if the intent is to be firm with the parents to indicate the situation is serious, “tough language” can be read as disrespect. This encourages the interaction to become a struggle for dominance to prove your side has authority or that it is an argument to be “won”.

Once a discussion has reached this stage, its resolution becomes problematic, because the groups will refuse to concede any valid points their “opponents” make, as Jim Pearson had done when he began thinking about relocating Michael. Furthermore, the argument reduces a participant’s desire to offer accommodations, because they feel that to do so is doing another person a favor that they have not earned. Bloom did this when he thought about going to get the pictures of Michael’s Facebook page to offer Barb Pearson the “proof” of his concerns that she wanted, but he wasn’t interested in doing anything she suggested because she had repeatedly questioned his credentials.
It seemed to the community of play that while rational though and careful wording might have made a difference, approaching the meeting with compassion for one another and working together would have made a great deal more. Unfortunately, as Juniper pointed out, the combative nature of our experience is probably a very common one in educational communities just because of how people are.

The mechanics of the scene also influenced the interactions, and in retrospect we found that when the circumstances for a scene are not specific, players interpreted them to favor their character’s point of view. Juniper M. and I had viewed this as the “last chance” meeting for the Pearsons, but Danielle S. and Jenny F. viewed it as an unsubstantiated attack on their character’s parenting skills. We reasoned that this is partially also the effect of finding ourselves invested in the character’s viewpoint through the repeated experience of playing them in the game. Jenny F. noticed that even when we could recognize that our character’s stance was not rational, which we generally didn’t until after play was over, we had a tendency to try to justify it to the group during the debrief.
Chapter 5: Data Interpretation

Introduction

Methodology

My methodology frames this research as a participatory arts-based inquiry that reveals concepts and ideas normally hidden to participants (Greene, 1995, p. 28). It does so through the embodiment of alternative perspectives in a series of American freeform role-playing games, thereby altering what frames of reference participants had access to (Sullivan, 2010, p. 58). Through immersion in this arts-based exploration, members of the community of play enhance their perception of how human activity functions (Barone and Eisner, 1997) in educational communities, and develop their ability to empathize with those involved in their everyday lives.

I collected data for this research in several forms in order to represent the multiple perspectives experienced by the participants as play proceeded (Stone-Mediato, 2003, cited in Hunter, Emerald, & Martin, 2013, p. 96). Each piece of data represents a “snapshot” of a point of location-consciousness that expresses in a particular manner how participants view the experience at that point.
Meaning is made and shared with the community of play during sessions and through individual reflection as the research progresses, giving the data a dynamic in-process quality that mirrors the concepts underlying the research. These snapshots and processes are incorporated into a polyvocal narrative of collective and individual insight (Irwin et al, 2006, p.85) represented by this dissertation.

**Data collection**

The data includes discourse recorded during each session’s pre-brief, which allows for reflection on their previous vital experiences (Dewey, 1934, p.246) and debrief, which provides a space for data that is semi-poeitic\(^{57}\) in its consideration of recently embodied experiences. Members also engaged in entrance and exit interviews that serve as an over-arching pre-brief and debrief for the research, and that allows them to directly express their relationship with the puzzles that I had crafted the research around\(^{58}\). Participant-created artifacts convey aisthetic\(^{59}\) data that represents the relationships between players, characters, and contexts.

My own perceptions and reactions became a source of data during the research through two additional means. Firstly, by journaling my experiences I document my participation and increasing familiarization with the world we created (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p.2).

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\(^{57}\) Because the lived experience of poeisis can never be “known” strictly speaking, this data is self-admittedly also a representation of a more cerebral reflection. However, it never the less represents as close to an embodied description of the effects of the game and of being a part of the community of play as is possible.

\(^{58}\) See p.20.

\(^{59}\) See p.75 & 145. “Aisthesis” refers to sensations and perceptions that are experienced as a force, rather than an object which is seen and evaluated.
Secondly, through bi-weekly debriefs with my advisor, Dr. Christine Ballengee-Morris I had access to an outsider’s perspective on our work that informs my understanding of the themes we pursue and supports the continuing safety of the manner in which we pursue it (Cox, 2014, p.388).

To interpret the data I collected, I return again to the puzzles outlined in Chapter 1: Introduction. It bears repeating that the ideas and themes in this chapter represent my own interpretation of how our community of play came to think of these concepts over the course of the research. The in-vivo codes that grew from the data described both the direction of the research and my interpretation of it. This chapter represents my synthesis of those findings, and references the diegetic and narrative creations of the community, their commentary upon it, and its influence on their professional lives.

**Where do power relations affect discourse in an educational community?**

**Authority**

Authority emerges as a performative role in our games, one whose power only extends from an individual or group’s willingness to perform that role. In order to be *recognized* as an authority, they must actively make and enforce decisions that appear to be in the interests of the system they represent. Furthermore, the amount of power they have access to is not always apparent, which lead to unintended consequences.

Authority is distinct (though connected to) status and influence, dependent upon the context it was exercised in, and not necessarily hierarchical.
This is evident in the first session in which the professional and professional identities intersect to influence the context of the characters for the discussion about Michael, as represented by the map of character relationships (fig. 16) and its description of their underlying tensions. Each relationship contains a number of factors that affect and are affected by each actor, an in process shifting of emergent realities (Greene, 1988).

**Faculty authority.** In her exit interview Juniper M. described her professional experiences in light of the games, and said that “we all say that we are just here for the students, but what that means really varies a lot. And in the end, we are pretty much controlled by where our authority comes from, where our power comes from.” Faculty members from The Indigo School may believe that they were there “for the students”, but their authority over them is derived from their status within the hierarchy of the school. As agents of that system (Foucault, 1995) their authority is reliant upon adherence to the strictures of the institution, structures that categorize and isolate students and teachers and keep them from engaging with each other as equals (Foucault 1995).

While ostensibly this separation is to the benefit of all involved (and to which they should therefore comply) (Greene, 1995), within the narrative there could be no point where Michael Pearson would be able to completely trust Danielle Scott (or any other faculty member) to do what is in his interest if it does not align with the interests of the school.
Figure 16: Initial character relationship map
At the same time, Scott’s function within that system is to help Michael achieve the control he seeks over his emotions and life in order to facilitate that alignment. This process requires that Michael and Scott construct some amount of mutual trust and understanding. In this sense the space between them is a part of what Foucault (1995) conceptualizes as a “learning machine” that is for “supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding” (p.147) as well as the dissemination of knowledge.

**Parental authority.** Parental authority exists outside of the hierarchy of the professionals within the system, and tends to conceive of the parent as the actual “consumer” of the school’s product. Their influence over the school centers on that conception, in the form of granting or withholding financial and social support for the educational community. However, since they exist outside of the professional hierarchical structure, parents can’t directly affect the day-to-day educational process. Note that this does not exclude them from the structure of the school itself, as they function as a “real agent” of authority whose presence is “economically advantageous and politically useful” (Foucault, 1980, p.100-101). In fact, Jenny F. specifically identifies their role, and says that when teachers are concerned about the behavior or safety of a student “That’s when we bring in the parents”. In this sense the educational institution and families, as the dominant structures, distribute “the interplay of powers and pleasures” (Foucault, 1990, p.46) that are inherent to the discourse between members in the community.
The character of Janice McComb has a large amount of authority as a parent and as head of the PTO. She had gathered this authority in order to have an impact on the education her son James received, in the execution of her chosen role as his protector and nurturer. Because of her “outsider” status and her authoritative position, Janice McComb is able to aggressively voice her opinions, and to have those opinions be considered an aspect of what was “best” for the school by its administrators. Her influence grew during the development of the story to the point where, when she spoke of how she intends to change the school, Juniper M. thought “God, she's like some evil overlord.”

One reason the idea of becoming the new head of the school is enticing for Janice McComb was that her son’s approaching graduation offers her an opportunity to redefine both herself and her relationship with the school. While she hopes this change will grant her even more influence, her perceived strength in that corner seeming to her to be a path to freedom (Nietzsche, 1977), she does not realize how much power she would be giving up by surrendering her “outsider” status and entering into the professional hierarchy.

**Student authority.** Students, as the “products” the school produced, don’t universally recognize that they have power over others. The point where they do recognize it most commonly is in their interactions with other students, which is part of what makes the social space of their shared lunch period valuable to them. Within that point of location-consciousness they manipulate and explore interpersonal relationships that contribute to how they see themselves and others, as well as the context they share.
When a character exerts power unintentionally, the character’s awareness or lack of awareness of the effects of that exertion affects their perceptions of their relationships, which in turn encourage or inhibit future actions.

An example from the narrative is when James thoughtlessly called Michael a “fag”, which caused Michael to lash out in a manner that made no sense to James, or how Michael’s actions and events from his life added to his sister Hayley’s burdens, complicating their feelings for one another. This lack of awareness exists in part because the characters did not perceive power as a discourse that they were a part of as anything other than a target, as opposed to being what Foucault (1980) identifies as “the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (p.98). Seeing themselves only as targets limits the character’s perspective to the things immediately acting upon them, a lack a critical understanding of their reality (Freire, 2005, p.104), as opposed to the broader view they might have seen if they perceived themselves as active participants in the discourse.

**Relationships and power**

**Student-faculty relationships.** Relationships between students and faculty exist in a state of productive tension between sympathy, wherein a character’s feelings are acknowledged, and empathy, wherein characters seek shared understanding of one another. That tension results from the fact that characters don’t always want to be “understood”, but to have it acknowledged that they are different and to be reassured that this difference matters while not making the character “less” than others. This is problematic for educators, because when there are “problems” the faculty feels they have a responsibility to “fix” it.
This exercise of domination (Freire, 1998) suggests that a static, stable, or healthy form had been disrupted by undesirable events or actions, and that it ought to be returned to its “default” setting. However, since this encounter had already been incorporated into the network of relationships it can’t truly be isolated or excised, whether or not an individual or group wants such a thing to occur.

Teacher involvement with student problems results when disruptive events are witnessed, recorded via data, confessed to by a student, or some combination thereof. Danielle Scott’s conversation with Michael, for example, was preceded by a witnessed account of his attack on James and the documentation of academic and social difficulties by teachers and administrators. Confession was viewed as an integral tool for altering the discourse, because it unveiled the “truth” and made space for a teacher to offer suggestions. There is a certain inevitability to the catharsis this confession represents, which Danielle represented when she played the feeling of Trust in Michael’s mind during session three. She describes the feeling she was trying to create in the face of other emotions by saying “It's just there. It's just white noise right now maybe, but maybe later on you're going to find it's ingrained in you. That may be finally, maybe, it's going to come up.”

However this technique is also situated in a relationship that relies on the twin mechanisms of pleasure and power: the pleasure of exercising power to question and bring information into the light and of the evasion of being “figured out” or controlled, of pursuing and opposing.
According to Foucault (1990) “these attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (Foucault, 1990, p.45) that rely both on a confessor and on a partner to represent the authority “who requires confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault, 1990, p.61-62).

**Inter-faculty relationships.** There is constant play between who the faculty are supposed to be as professionals and who they want to be outside of that role, an idea that stands at the intersection of Foucault’s description of relationships that involve power as “conditioning and conditional” (p142) and Greene’s (1995) claim that “To be yourself is to be in process of creating a self, an identity” (p. 20). The play between those tensions becomes more visible during session three in the scene within the teacher’s lounge; a place where the personal identity is supposedly allowed to supersede the professional one. This juxtaposition of identities affects relationships and provides a point of location-consciousness (Hans, 1981) that allows a teacher to differentiate themselves from their colleagues, a difference that makes room for them to receive professional and personal support. This support disrupts assumptions characters make, and creates opportunities for new avenues of personal and professional exploration.
These opportunities rely on feeling safe, a state that consists of three factors: 1) trust of a colleague’s expertise; 2) an appropriate intersection of personal boundaries; 3) the belief that one’s own professional or personal self-image will not be destabilized by the interaction. For Gerald Bloom to get the help he desires for understanding his daughters he had to negotiate these three factors. This required he change his view of Danielle Scott to see her as a person with a distinct set of capabilities and experiences from his own, and for him to approach their relationship on more equal grounds.

**Inter-family Relationships.** The Pearsons were our most developed example of the discourse of power inside a family (fig. 17). Though the tendency might have been to regard that family as exceptional because of the degree of investment we have in the characters and their narrative, players agreed that the challenges and relationships within it were likely not uncommon for many American households. This agreement is interesting because our initial perception of what a family was and how it ought to behave was based on a stereotype that we knew to be false.

The Pearsons had themselves been making a communal effort to embody this stereotype, and appeared in public as a successful family: two professional parents, three intelligent children, and perfectly ordered lives. The difficulties they face, such as Jim and Barb’s trouble in connecting to each other, or Michael’s increasing isolation from the rest of the family, are private troubles that were meant to remain behind this façade.
In this sense the personal and communal mask they offer to the world is not only a superficial interpretation of who they were, but a self-deluding representation of certainty of the sort Nietzsche (1954) thought “may be necessary for the maintenance of beings such as ourselves” (p.384-385). Michael’s actions disrupt the illusion that their family was “normal”, which affects not only whether outsiders saw the family as deviant or wrong (Foucault, 1984, Bode & Nieto, 2012), but also how the family members themselves perceive and act towards one another. From that point the family has to decide if they wanted to continue to act as if nothing had changed, to attempt to restore the illusion Michael had disrupted, or to make alterations to their lives in response to this new perspective, but it was a conversation that the family could not initiate because of the betrayals of trust the members felt they had endured from one another.

**Gender**

Within these interactions gender discourse plays an often unspoken but profound role. When two male characters have a point of confrontation, each believing they were “standing” for something, they tend to grow increasingly loud in an attempt to assert their dominance. This is especially pronounced if the players who occupy those roles were male, as was the case in the confrontation between Gerald Bloom and W.R. Bechtle in session three, but it is also true of other interactions, such as the contentious father-son difficulties between Jenny F. as Jim Pearson and John Paul as Michael Pearson in session two. In every case the direct presentation of authority (and the inferences of power associated with it) inspires the resistance that Foucault (1990) claims is a natural consequence.
Figure 17: Map of Pearson family dynamics
The confrontations cause female characters to grow proportionately quieter, though it does not necessarily make them any less firm in representing their own point of view. The confrontations and avoidances again highlight the link between power and pleasure (Foucault, 1990, p.45), even while they naturally engender a high degree of frustration. The play between those states according to Foucault are not a crossing of boundaries, from one state to another, but “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (p.45) that have traced around bodies and sexes.

**Gender and art educators.** As noted in Chapter 4: Data, both John Paul and I remarked that male educators could feel intimidated by their female colleagues. Danielle S. suggested that conversations in “non-teaching” spaces tended to favor what were perceived as female subjects and themes, which we theorize might lead to male educators feeling explicitly or implicitly excluded from conversations, and possibly the space as well. We also discussed how the low number of male educators, specifically in art education, leads to the assumption that there must be something wrong with the males in that profession, that they are “creepy”, didn’t seem trustworthy, or that they are not as interactive with the rest of the faculty. Participants found they hadn’t had these conversations with their colleagues before, and hadn’t considered the impact of gender within those spaces. In *The history of sexuality* (1990) Foucault suggests that this might be in part because of the unspoken strictly defined rules regarding where and when it is possible to talk about sex that denote “in which circumstances, among which speakers, and within which social relationships” (p.18) such a thing is permissible.
The dynamics of this conception grew more complex as a result of John Paul’s absence from session four. Where there regularly had been three female members and two males, I was then the only male present. In John Paul’s absence, my role as an authority within the group becomes exaggerated, and the other members speak less and rely more on what I tell them to do rather than challenging and modifying my ideas. I had sought to avoid this situation, and the parallel between my authority during this session with that imposed by my character Gerald Bloom upon his colleagues was disconcerting. In that we had altered the dimensions of our group by subtracting a member we had completely altered the group itself, effectively rendering a new multiplicity for that session with a different “enveloping line” for determining what was or was not possible (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.245). As we share experiences during the session players offer more suggestions and it ended with all members on relatively equal footing, though the questions it raises as to how that imbalance can be avoided need revisiting.

**Context**

Because relationships are context-specific, the physical locations the interactions occurred in enable, inhibit, or reveal particular exertions of power. Hans (1981) speaks to this in a large scale as society, which he says “is a field of play itself, one which attempts to appropriate other fields of play for its own uses” (p.141), but the point seems applicable to educational communities as well. The geo-political location of the school determines its relationship with its students and the surrounding community, which in turn contributes to the “identity” of the school.
A private school surrounded by a low-income rural community like The Indigo School encourages substantially different ideas and interactions in its population than a public school in a wealthy suburb.

This network of contexts affects the relationships between community members and influences their ideas about what behaviors were “appropriate” for the setting. However, the borders of those behaviors are not completely defined, nor are there ways to absolutely declare what actions are or are not be taken in relation to them. The relationships creates a discourse of power, which by definition includes a negotiation between the collections of factors that intersected in any given circumstance.

Public schools and private schools. The nature of the school is one of the key elements in this discourse, meant to be studied “as totalities in themselves and as parts of another totality” (Freire, 2005, p.142) in order to reduce the alienating qualities they would have as abstract entities. The most obvious division between such institutions is whether they are public or private. Public schools make the assumption that every member of that community is beholden to its system, which is large and slow, moving, but which has various processes that govern relationships within it. Members are relatively secure in their positions and the school is regarded as the space a child “belongs” in, partially because of the universal experience of the bureaucracy and partially because it’s assumed the student has no viable alternatives. Consequently, the school sees itself as providing education as the alternative to an undefended and uncertain future.
Within a private school, memberships are exclusive and conditional. Members of the community believe that their school offers opportunities particular to its population, which they seek to develop and take advantage of. Membership requires engagement with the community though, and may be rescinded if a member isn’t seen as a good “fit”. A head of school must satisfy individual concerns rather than those of a system, a parent must contribute either money or services to secure enrollment for their child, and a student must exhibit behaviors and aptitudes that the school and their parents wish to see.

**Social spaces.** There is a connection between socializing and points of location-consciousness designated for eating food, which appeared as a reoccurring trope in the games. In session two this took the form of the Pearson family dinners, and in session three included the 7th grade lunch table and the teacher’s lounge. The roles social spaces play in these interactions are interesting, as they establish temporal and physical borders for personal and communal identities to exist within. It is in these shared spaces that Greene (1995) would say community is created because they offer "the space in which to discover what they recognize together and appreciate in common" (p. 39).

These spaces are established as “belonging” to particular groups who meet at particular times, which defines points of location-consciousness with restricted fields of play. The imposition of an actor who does not belong, such as a student coming into the lounge to deliver a message or a phone call to Barb or Jim Pearson from a teacher during dinner, would have been a disruptive transgression of that space.

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60 See page 57. Location consciousness refers to context as a point of interconnected space and time.
To have the authority to enact this transgression would feel empowering to the actor crossing that border, as they would be aware of the exception that made for their presence. However, without such an interloper the members of a community feel free to perform what they perceive as their “real” identities. In this performance they exhibit more concern for the people who exist within the space than the space itself. It doesn’t actually matter where they are or what they are doing, as those attributes only exist so that the members of the community can be doing it together.

**How and why do individuals in educational communities align themselves with particular groups (teachers, parents, administrators, staff, students, etc.)?**

**Unity**

I found that characters unify during scenes for what they perceive to be a “common good”, because that unity grants the appearance of authority. However, the identity of the unified authority requires that members sacrifice individual goals to a “common good”. In *The order of things* Foucault (1970) describes these kinds of connections in his definition of analogies as a superimposition of resemblances (*convenientia*) and adjacencies, bonds, and joints (*aemulatio*). This analogy is versatile, according to Foucault, because “the similitudes of which it treats are not the visible, substantial ones between things themselves; they need only be more subtle resemblances of relations” (p.21), allowing for a continuing stream of relationships to form. In a later lecture Foucault (1991) illustrates how this plays out in government, wherein submission to sovereignty is considered inextricable from that which is “good”.

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While not everyone can be happy, that community tries to balance individual goals in the creation of a communal goal that members feel is important. However, the sacrifice contributes to a feeling that the communal goal is one that they must collectively stand firm and resolute upon.

The clearest expression of this concept is the confrontation Barb and Jim Pearson has with Sean Mitchell and Gerald Bloom over whether or not Michael should continue at The Indigo School. In that encounter, the maintenance and support of unity in the name of a “side” of this question made members less flexible in confrontations, which actively damages the interests of community members. This occurs when the unified authority confronts a counter-authority, as the two became locked in a test of strength (or what the respective authorities perceived as their strengths) wherein the goal isn’t to satisfy the presumptive desires of the unified authority or its members, but to “win” and to establish themselves as the dominant authority. In this case, for Jim and Barbara Pearson to prove they are good parents by defending their child or for Sean Mitchell and Gerald Bloom to prove they are experts by exercising their authority in a manner that appears to benefit the school. While “victory” may allow an authority to establish mechanisms for achieving its goal, it also creates a new counter-authority and causes the cycle to repeat. Goals and issues are never completely resolved, and a community never wholly achieves its purpose, as both are eternally as in-process as their individual members.
The fringe

In discussion with participants some commonalities about the role art educators play as teachers emerge. While it is clear, as Foucault (1990) states that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p.93), within the authoritative system of an educational community art educators occupy a curious “fringe” position that they share with other faculty like librarians, music teachers, and physical education teachers. Deleuze & Guattari (1987) maintain that every system contains individuals who were on the outside edge, saying that "wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual” (p.243), and that in many ways these individuals define what the borders of that multiplicity was by troubling them.

Since art educators don’t see the same students throughout the day, there sometimes exists a perception that they don’t know those students as well or that they work less ardently towards their development as compared to other teachers, which places limits on their influence within the group.

As “non-core” disciplines, art educators are often included in several different groupings of faculty that represent various (and sometimes competing) interests. John Paul expressed in his exit interview that this is incorporation is a necessity because art educators are often not considered essential, saying that “We align ourselves with so many different factions, and sometimes they are warring factions, because we need to. The arts are kind of put off to the side, they are “all you others”.”
The interests of these groups might represent the needs of a particular grade level, the inter-personal relationships among the members, the goals of the administration, or parental initiatives. Because they may be involved with many different groupings, art educators need to be flexible in their interactions with their colleagues. This means listening to many different perspectives to gain a holistic image of a situation, either for application in the teacher’s own class or to help the art educator to decide whether or not to exert what influence they have within their groups.

**How do art educators convey solutions to personal, professional, and relational risks?**

The risks art educators encounter are inter-contextual, exist in a state of constant flux, and often, feature actors that the educators cannot perceive. The navigation of these shifting realities can be unnerving, but the uncertainty and risk they encounter has generative potential that shouldn’t be so much avoided as negotiated and managed. John Paul described this idea in his exit interview: “If you're always afraid to be wrong, you are never going to be able to create anything original. Because you can't step outside of what is known, you can't step outside of what is already in the textbooks. Yeah, that's where you fail, but that's also where things happen, that's where you succeed, and that's where you do things that have never been done before.”

This negotiation of risk and reward tends towards actions that put a teacher’s ego at stake rather than the wellbeing of others, such as in an admission of ignorance or by an attempt at an artistic act that they are unsure they will be able to accomplish.
These acts encourage the members to grow as artists and as educators, allow the educators to be self-reflective and critical of their own abilities, and make the process and the risk transparent for other members of their educational community. The actions often aren’t the result of individual efforts, but of brainstorming with friends and colleagues to whom the teachers are connected.

The process emphasizes reflexivity, and members make adjustments as the chosen risk intersects with planned and unplanned encounters the teacher experiences. They don’t rely on mastery, and allow for experimentation with media and ideas the educators are less familiar with. The results are never certain, and errors are a possibility, but that risk is accepted as inherent to the informative nature of the explorations they undertake.

**Personal risks**

Because the principle risk in these actions relate to how an educator is perceived as an artist and as an educator, it is important for them to define what that means for an art educator’s identity. An important part of that identity is that there is a distinction drawn between being an “art educator” and a person who teaches art. John Paul describes the difference thusly: “I think that the difference is a continual exploration of content, of theory, of trying to do better things for your students. There are people out there who just teach art, where they do the same stuff over, over, and over again, without any other extraneous things. But I think that allowing larger things to infiltrate your teaching is important.”
As a layered identity, being an art educator involves the desire to make what the teacher perceives to be a positive difference in the educational environment as well as for the students, to follow Greene’s (1995) description of education as a matter of "breaking through barriers-of expectation, of boredom, of predefinition." (p. 14) and Freire’s (1998) belief that their role is to offer multiple “readings of the world” (p.244) for students to engage with.

They achieve this act by viewing teaching practice as an artistic media they can effect change through, a view that invites the exploratory and reflexive process described above. By contrast, if a teacher’s focus is solely to impart studio skills and art historical facts then their goal is informative rather than transformative, a representation of what Freire calls banking model (1998, p.70) of education. Though it seems possible to teach art without the transformational aims of art educators, it runs so counter to member’s conceptions of who they want to be as educators and what they think of as the purposes of art and art education as to feel it is disconnected from reality.

**Professional risks**

Reflective practices invite personal growth for members as artists and educators, but a repeated focus on points where art educators think they have fallen short can create feelings of guilt that affect their practice, as well as other aspects of their lives. This feeling is exacerbated if they are isolated from their colleagues in the educational community, as those colleagues constitute a support network that supplies information, resources, alternative points of view, and sympathetic personages to confide in.
This occurs if educators in the community don’t appreciate one another’s place in the school, which leads to the perception that their discipline doesn’t contain intrinsic value. Participants mitigate this perception by providing art-making materials and expertise to colleagues and by supporting curricula from other classes, which exhibits their personal value to the educational community and their relationships within it.

When participants encounter situations with students that they feel the need to resolve, they are predisposed to seeing it as being composed of multiple intersecting layers. This is, at least in part, due to their awareness that they encounter students less than other teachers, and their belief that the arts provide an opportunity for different perspective to emerge. Consequently, they plan interventions by dividing the issue into smaller components that are comprehensible and that can be applied via several different strategies over an extended period of time. These interventions focus on identifying and engaging with the cause of the situation, and require commitment and patience from stakeholders who might prefer more immediate solutions. Thus they also require that there be a foundation of trust between the art educator and those stakeholders.

As art educators, participants have to consider how to advocate for art, which they commonly do via their teaching practice and the presentation of themselves as a model of what an artist might look like and act like. This is especially directed at the students who, the teacher hopes, will become advocates for the arts once they reached adulthood. When students are perceived to be particularly artistic or insightful they are often encouraged to pursue careers as art educators themselves.
This experience had been shared by the majority of our community of play in their own education. As noted above, this approach is neither fast nor easy, and so again requires that their efforts be built on a foundation of trust.

**Relational risks**

An art educator’s academic and artistic expectations exist in a relationship with their ability to sympathize with lived experiences and to empathize with those affected by them. Though judgment of students is an aspect of their role as an authority, they exercise that judgment in the knowledge that there is a diversity of experience and perspective in play. Because diversity matters, they encourage discourse that extends past the ability to perform a role for the educational community.

While this approach has benefits, it means that members have to constantly redefine where the lines between actors exist. Since the artworks that they introduce to their classes may represent points of view anathema to an individual or community’s beliefs, the discipline itself is a part of that negotiation. So too is the decision for how much of their personal life they share or ask others to share within the community. Those decisions affect how they are perceived as a person and as a professional, and impact their relationships.
Whose understanding of the role or purpose of education should take precedence in educational communities?

The variation of perspectives within an educational community creates a wide range of understandings of the community’s purpose, though characters often assume that they are in agreement. The authorities we role-played during the interview scene in session two represent The Indigo School as a collective identity made up of parents, faculty, and administrators (leaving students unrepresented by themselves for this discussion). Despite the assumptions characters make that they share a common cause, that composite identity is not at all uniform, as can be seen in the map of intersections that contributed to the school’s identity in that scene (fig. 18) and the dissections of each character’s relationships and values (figs. 19–20).

As an example, Danielle Scott believes that the school should be a safe and stable environment to foster development, and to that end would prefer Bella Arturo (as a trusted friend and colleague) remain head of the school. Meanwhile, Bob Stevens believes he has a responsibility to lead the school and increase the value of student education by improving test scores, and so wants a head of school who would follow his lead in facilitating those changes. It is in the continual discourse between these disparate points of view that the identity of the educational community is forged.
Figure 18: Map of the Mitchell interview
Figure 19: Map of the Mitchell interview (dissection 1)
Figure 20: Map of the Mitchell interview (dissection 2)
Education as critical thought

Members of our community of play emphasize critical thinking, particularly as it applies to creatively interpreting and expressing ideas. They see this as the key for students to be, as Juniper M. says, “as autonomous as possible and feel like they have some sense of control over their existence”, to be a contributing member of society and someone who will pass on what they have learned. These thinking skills are developed alongside of a diverse range of other skills that give students the tools to think about and engage with the world around them. Critical thinking and interactive skills are meant to intersect so that students make meaning of the knowledge, and ultimately allows them to define what they believe success actually is and supplies them with the means to achieve it in a world that is always changing.

Education as standardization

Participants define the purpose of education as liberatory and individualized, and they outline the perimeter of that belief with the declaration that education should not induce or rely upon conformity. The current emphasis on testing over content, of trying to achieve efficiency by manipulating schools to meet pre-determined goals (Greene, 1995, p. 9), runs counter to what members thought of as best practices. While it is hard to fathom that a conformist goal would seem ideal to anyone, it was difficult for them to imagine many other purposes. At the very least it seems designed so that students would acquire skills believed to exhibit their “worth” to society and which lead into particular career paths.
In the view of participants, when conformity is the core of education, educational communities become places for children to be sent to so that they are out of the way until they become useful products. Independence is discouraged and students trained to memorize and follow, but not analyze, instructions.

The effects of this model are evident in Jenny F.’s description of how she perceives the effects of current testing initiatives: “I'm sure they don't hate children, but it's hard to see it that way. It's hard to see it any other way when I'm hearing that third-graders have to sit still for 45 min. and can't get up to go to the bathroom. And then I'm hearing to that SLO’s might get going away with, and special teachers would be judged based on PARCC scores and things like that. And it's like “that's not even our content. Are you going to change our content so that we have to teach to this test too?” And it's just like, what's the point?”

**The tension between uncertainty and structure**

There is a productive tension in how educational communities are conceived between this apparent binary of exploration and restriction. Participants recognize that their organic and uncertain approach isn’t wholly dichotomous with the measured and orchestrated practices they resist, but that they instead frame the discourse of education around a shared understanding of the worth of education and a constant reaching towards its potential.

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61 Student learning objectives. A measure of student growth, designed following state guidelines by Ohio teachers, which are meant to illustrate a teacher’s impact. (Ohio department of education, 2015)

As Freire (2005) tells us "There is no freedom without authority, but there is also no authority without freedom. All freedom contains the possibility that under special circumstances (and at different existential levels) it may become authority. Freedom and authority cannot be isolated, but must be considered in relationship to each other" (p.178).

Engaging in this discourse gives rise to existential questions that have to be constantly reconsidered regarding how we measure success, both for the practice of education and for a human life. The ongoing and continuous nature of this conversation encourages the idea that critical thinking plays a role in that development, especially within a democratic society, since the ability to make change within a system is reliant upon the ability and desire to imagine what that change might look like. This process, as Nietzsche (1954) articulates, involves a challenge of some given values so that we may look past our own limitations: "that the certain is worth more than the uncertain, that illusion is less valuable than "truth"p.384-385). The implementation, reflection, and adjustment of those changes requires the imposition of order, but that order has to be understood as imperfect and in-process.
What effect does using American Freeform as a media for arts-based inquiry have?

The connections and embodied experiences members of the community of play create through American freeform are valuable to them as tools for inquiry and exploration. These tools are interconnected facets of the experience, which include the genesis of the characters and the diegetic world, their development, their interpretation through participant-created artifacts, and the possible applications of the techniques that members suggested. Each application engages with Hans’ (1981) definition of play as “an experiential mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world, and all experience within such a mode is confirmed or denied in the playing-out of the experience” (p.12).

Genesis

Genesis (Bowman, 2010) describes the initial creation of diegetic elements of the games, such as characters and context. It provides a structure for understanding the mechanics of the game and the intent of the research by providing a context around which participants orient their perspectives (Hans, 1981). Genesis as an experience also exhibits Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) “meaningful play” schema of rules, play, and culture (p.6). Genesis in this research can be described as answering questions directed at one of those three aspects of the schema.
**Rules.** Questions directed at the rules examine mechanical affordances such as “what am I allowed to play in this context?” This refers both to restrictions based on the social or professional roles we make available for the scene and the techniques we used to impose uncertainty, such as the ball-of-yarn technique from session one or the list of attributes John Paul had to incorporate into the creation of Michael Pearson. Answers to rules questions provide structure, but that structure stays pliable. As Hans (1981) says, “learning the rules is never enough to be able to play the game well” (p.56) because they cannot account for unexpected changes, meaning that the play must be adjusted as the game proceeds. Working within these restrictions provides a structure for the diegetic reality to emerge from, as well as a shared conceptual field of play for community members.

**Play.** Questions about play examine the human experience of the game, such as “what roles will be interesting?” or “Who do I know that reminds me of this role, and how do I feel about them?” These questions may point to relationships with other players, encourage particular types of play, or examine questions about one’s own life. This can be conceived as identifying that which is other to a participant and then applying mimetic appropriation to begin to achieve understanding (Nietzsche, 1977), a process that will inevitably have to diverge from strict resemblance in order for it to function appropriately (Hans, 1981).
For example, Jenny F. based her portrayal of Jim Pearson on her own father, which raises interesting questions for her and provides an emotional depth to the character, though the character also developed in a manner specific to the diegetic context, which allows for an exploration of that character’s particular lived experience.

**Culture.** Cultural questions draw on the context the play is set in, which for us refers to the ever-expanding diegetic world of The Indigo School. Characters created from this perspective could answer questions about the culture we create, such as Hayley’s increasing load of responsibilities in the absence of her parents, or added layers to pre-existing characters, as was the case when we agreed that Janice McComb was the head of the PTO. Cultural questions in genesis situate the actors into particular sections of space and time, establishing points of location-consciousness (Hans, 1981, p.196) for us to focus on.

**Development**

The lines between character and player are intentionally blurred to enhance the quality of “bleed” between them and encourage the development of empathy. The repeated embodiment of the characters over time allows this bleed to occur, but also affects the community’s investment and development of the diegetic world and its application as a media for self-reflection.

**Empathy.** The games give participants access to new perspectives, and allow them to, as Greene (1995) tells us, “cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called "other" over the years” (p.3) because the imagined worlds allow them “to give credence to alternative realities” (p.3).
This is true both for characters that they embody, and those they observe other members perform and discuss. Participants recognize that this perspective isn’t universally represented in every real-life person who occupies similar contexts to the ones they experience, but it still provides an opening through which they achieve an appreciation of what it *might* feel like. This encourages them to be mindful of the complex lives their own students live outside of their classrooms, and gives members a new respect for some of the difficulties their colleagues face.

**Investment.** The repeatedly embodied experiences create a sense of investment in the characters and their world. The relationships between members of the community of play and the diegetic world are not fixed, but develop as we learn more about each and as members find points of common experience with their fictional counterparts. This creates a sympathetic bond between members and characters, which predisposes a participant to justify a character’s actions or worldview even when they know it isn’t rational. The assumption of a diverse set of roles and group reflection in the debrief keeps that sympathy from obscuring underlying issues and concerns by illustrating the importance of perspective in deciding what a scene had been “about”. This was evident in the debrief following the confrontation between Jim and Barbara Pearson with Sean Mitchell and Gerald Bloom over Michael Pearson’s future, during which time participants realized they still felt emotionally connected to the goals of their characters and chose to use that realization as a point of reflection and introspection.
Diegesis. Player investment in the characters affects the narrative a community constructs. This is because in addition to the mimetic, synthetic, and thematic aspects of the story\(^{63}\), the developing narrative interacts with both individual experiences and those of the community of play as a whole. Because that process is collaborative the outcome for a given character could be narratively satisfying for one player but not for another, a situation that this community wishes to avoid. In creating systems that focused on dynamic relationships players feel that any “end” they apply to the narrative would be arbitrary, which adds to its feeling of verisimilitude.

One aspect that affects narrative development are the scenes that I describe as “mimetic-adjacent”. Because the physical appearance of a player or scene is often radically different than what they represent, players fill in those details by drawing on their own experiences. Thus what Michael Pearson and Bella Arturo look like depends a great deal more on a player’s point of view than that of their characters. Because the model person (Herman, 2012, p.127) a player imagines is based on their lived experiences, characters have a feeling of familiarity and believability housed in a specific set of assumptions. This feeling of veracity is present even when the model person is inhuman, as was the case in session three when members embodied living emotions, which contributed to the intensity of the scene for players.

\(^{63}\) See p.137
**Self-reflection.** Members use the liminal space of the games to reflect on their lives as performed through their characters. Some opportunities for reflection are unintended, as when Jenny F. realized she had drawn on her parents in creating and enacting the roles of Jenny Fairborn and Jim Pearson. This isn’t always comfortable, because it draws attention to attributes or experiences members don’t often think about, heightens their awareness of privileges they enjoy, and highlights unresolved issues in educational practice. However, because members are a part of a community they trust and that is composed of members who are likewise confronting problematic ideas, they are able to think and talk about subjects that normally are avoided. Hans (1981) tells us this shared willingness to re-examine beliefs and experiences is necessary for play when he says that “calling one’s beliefs into question, after all, is a fundamental way of subjecting oneself to great risk, for if those beliefs fall, so does one’s self-conception. Everyone must be willing to assume the same risk or play cannot proceed” (p.70-71)

**Artifacts**

Artifact creation provides aisthetic\(^64\) data that represents the intersubjective\(^65\) relationships of the research. The creation of the artifacts causes participants to think about and express experiences differently, one in which their acts of creation provoke new insights into the connections that are formed. An example of this is the artifact Jenny F. shared at the beginning of session three, which deepened the community’s understanding of the father-son relationship between Jim and Michael Pearson.

\(^{64}\) See p.75 & 145. “Aisthesis” refers to sensations and perceptions that are experienced as a force, rather than an object which is seen and evaluated.

\(^{65}\) See p. 26. “Intersubjective” refers to a stance that allows for “shared symbolically-mediated meanings” (Parsons, 1995) that exist as a part of a network of discourse (Crossley, 1996).
Both of them felt there was a way things were “supposed” to be, and felt fear and resentment at the fact that this was not the case for them.

Additionally, sharing artifacts becomes a communal event for participants that opens the floor to members of the community of play and allows them to focus solely on their own interpretations of the games, and encourages the development of understanding and trust between members in the community of play. The artifacts evolve as cross-referential works, which connect through themes, imagery, and media as well as by experience, so that each represents a new perspective on the experience of the research as a whole.

**Conclusion**

The exploration of the puzzles I pose relies on the collaborative artistry of the community of play to take the form it does. The results of that exploration provide the foundation for the interpretations described in this chapter. Together we came to see power as a contextually specific element whose exertion is intrinsic to the identity of an authority. We found that where unity brings the appearance of this authority, an existence on the fringe allows for flexibility and independence that is in many respects more effective in attaining goals. Amongst other things, that flexibility allows art educators to relax their hold on authority, and to risk the perception that they were not all-knowing in exchange for the thinking needed to engage with problems as a network of factors, as opposed to a single obstacle. This perception feeds an understanding of how education is an ongoing discourse of structure and uncertainty.
All of the insights presented grew through use of American freeform as a media for collaborative acts of creation, embodiment, and reflection throughout the research.

The next chapter concludes this research with an overview of what these interpretations amount to, both for my topic and for myself, and suggest some directions the research may continue to grow. Most notably, that the techniques we employed could be an invaluable asset in the education of pre-service educators and for professional development.
Chapter 6: Conclusions & Implications

Introduction

American freeform exceeded expectations as a media of inquiry into educational communities, and participants found it informative, interesting, and exciting. While the role-played encounters focus on themes and ideas participants were aware of, drawing as they do from their own experiences, knowing these concepts proved not to be the same thing as living them. This is true both in the understanding of concepts drawn from everyday lives, as Eisner (2002) tells us when he says that “meaning is not limited to what words can express” (p.230, italics in the original), and in envisioning what might yet be, as Sullivan (2010) suggests when he states that "we create to understand. We imagine as we come to know" (p. 60). Jenny F. expressed the effect at her exit interview when she said that “Obviously I was projecting my own life experiences into my characters. But I was reaching, trying to reach, into what might be going on in other students’ lives.” The only regret players have is that the research eventually had to end. From the plateau of that conclusion, I can look back and appreciate our efforts and speculate as to what might be possible in its next iteration.
Impact

Participants

The primary beneficiaries of this research are the members of the community of play, for whom the lived experience of the games was enjoyable and applicable to their professional lives. Furthermore, membership in the community of play deepened the relationships between members, and allowed for the development of collegial support that provides some of the benefits we had discussed during the research. Even while we created and explored the community of The Indigo School, participants shared their concerns and aspirations, and offered what help they could to one another. In those acts, quotidian concerns are transformed through play into comprehensible and manageable concepts that the entire community could interact with and learn from.

Additionally, the efforts to explore the structure of educational communities raise questions for members about those structures that are normally left unattended. Hans (1981) tells us this is the result of play, which is “characterized by rupture” of the self-centered continuity of our daily (p.43). Rupture in our games includes questions that are sensitive, such as the effect gender and sexuality have in an educational community, or which attend to the nature of the system, such as the player’s own roles as agents of authority for their schools. While this research does not seek to resolve those questions, their consideration affects the practices of members and provokes the desire to envision something new. This exhibits the beginning of what Greene (1995) terms a “sense of possibility” (p.38) in our members.
Arts-based research

Arts-based research has involved theater, improvisation, and performance before (Leavy, 2009), but the unique affordances of American freeform role-playing aren’t yet well known in arts education. In my research, three particular aspects stand out the most. Firstly, that it provides a lived understanding of concepts and issues, re-casting “normal” experiences as points for critical reflection. This has an effect on teaching practices, as John Paul describes the games causing him to “reconsider what am I saying, how am I saying it, and why.” Secondly, that it utilizes membership in the community of play to disrupt assumptions, a controlled uncertainty based in collaborative discourse. Juniper M. expresses one aspect of this when she said that “when I go in and have to develop and control my relationships with parents, administrators, counselors, students… I feel like the experiences here give me something else to draw on besides just what I think should happen.” Lastly, that the game-based exploratory mechanisms simultaneously provide a structure to frame the exploration of a field of play and removed a player’s ability to completely dictate how they engaged with that field, what Jenny F. describes as the opportunity to “experience an emotionally high scenario without the personal attachment.” These attributes collectively allowed questions to develop that would otherwise have remained invisible, and to experience a visceral embodiment of knowledge that is distinct from any other representation.
Educational thought

In the exploration of the discourse of power in educational communities, several themes arose that deserve attention. Among these is the understanding that as a discourse the role of power is dynamic, rather than fixed, and that how it is perceived or exercised depends on the context in which its effects are made visible. This concept is supported by two particular lines of thought. Firstly, by Freire’s (2005) claim that a community represents not an individual actor or a group of actors, "but rather of actors in intercommunication" (p.129). This understanding supports the resistance of the decontextualization of education, and thereby educator’s ability to “avoid feeling like a chess piece or a cog or even an accomplice of some kind” (Greene, 1995, p. 11). Secondly, this understanding exhibits the link between desire and discourse, in which longing is transformed into a thing we think we can understand (which is to say language) and which we therefore can control and be controlled by (Foucault, 1990).

This understanding of power as an aspect of dynamic relationships is intertwined with the conclusion that authority and influence are distinct traits from power, but ones that inhibit or encourage particular exercises of that power. Furthermore, the research highlights that authority is itself contextual. It might be tied to a hierarchy, a projection of “unity”, or the perception that it exists outside of the system it is attempting to affect, but it is reliant upon its performance of being the authority in that context in order to exert its influence. This exertion by educational authorities tends "to have more to do with channeling than with opening opportunities” (Greene, 1995, p. 51), though it may seem equitable to those authorities when they view students as abstract concepts.
The necessary play between sympathy and empathy within the discourse of power is similarly noteworthy. Empathy is under-utilized within contemporary educational practice, which tends to be preoccupied with scores, procedures, percentages, and accountability measures, while at the same time “it screens out the faces and gestures of individuals, of actual living persons” (Greene, 1995, p. 11), but this doesn’t mean that empathy should simply replace the role of sympathy within schools. Indeed, the sessions contained points of interaction wherein what a character craves is the acknowledgement of difference that accompanies sympathy, rather than an empathic attempt to have a shared or fully understood experience. Therefore empathy and sympathy must be understood as being in a relationship with one another, not separate and divisible states, which can consequently can be engaged with in a field of play.

Even while people reach towards an understanding of one another, each individual involved “must feel himself to be a distinctive person, confronting negations, caught up in the situations which give content to his life” (Greene, 1967, pp.163-164). This is a relationship that contains a shifting of realities that is continually redefined through interaction and discourse, and that creates apertures or blockages that are dependent upon the actors at play in an intersection of location-consciousness. As is always the case in caring-practice professions, this relationship relies on trust, is socially situated “and must relate to the particular person and situation as they evolve through time” (Benner & Gordon, 1996, p.45).
The encounter between Michael Pearson and his mother Barbara at dinner is an example of this complex discourse: Barbara claims that her role as a mother means that she understands her son, and while for him her love is not in doubt, Michael knows she has no real idea of what he is feeling with regards to his family, his school life, or his sexuality. Whether or not she would be able to attain a measure of understanding through the societally-sanctioned method of confession (Foucault, 1990) is besides the point, because what he truly desires is not to be judged on these matters, but to be allowed the space and time he thinks he needs to grapple with the ideas himself. Within the play of sympathy and empathy that exists between the two, there is the potential for Michael and Barbara Pearson (and for participants) to experience phenomena that "offer new lenses through which to look out at and interpret the educative acts that keep human beings and their cultures alive" (Greene, 1995, p. 18).

Next Steps

Educational applications

The techniques we used demonstrate a potential for application in pre-service education and in professional development inside and outside of the arts. I designed the research to explore how participants understand relationships in educational communities, rather than as an educational tool. However, given Greene’s (1995) stance that imagination allows both teaching and learning to break through the barriers enshrined through repetition (p.14), there is no reason for those purposes to be mutually exclusive.
An application of the techniques towards this purpose will create a method similar to process drama. Process drama works from the premise that “knowledge is acquired through engagement with content instead of imitation or repetition” (Landy and Montgomery, 2012, p.19-20), and more particularly the “Role Method”, which allows people to identify and explore roles that are difficult for them to understand (p.199).

There are two restrictions to using American freeform in this manner. Firstly, it requires that all participants to agree to the commitments of being in a community of play. If members do not trust each other, or if they don’t believe the games have value, they cannot engage in the communal risk necessary to a state of play (Hans 1981). Secondly, a community must recognize that the techniques don’t attempt to solve a problem but to surround it, meaning that the resulting insights are local and particular (Sullivan, 2010, p.31). The games would continue to focus on exploration and imagination, rather than a completely believable simulation, because those themes contain the generative uncertainty that is central to my methodology.

**Student teaching.** The games fills gaps participants see in their own education, which indicates they could and should be incorporated into pre-service education. The games function in this manner because they put reflections and discoveries of the practitioners at the forefront, in place of what a given institution might consider “best practices” that allow for or proscribe particular actions.

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66 See Chapter 2: Literature Review.
67 As described in Chapter 3: Design of Study
Juniper M. specifically states that she “was able to come to understand these really intricate relationships, and drives, and desires of administration, and parents, and teachers, and students… I just don't know that I could have gotten that any other way other than actual life experience. There is no textbook, there is no traditional class, that would have provided that learning.”

The games facilitate this development for members in three different ways. Firstly, they present a safe emotional and professional space for members to confront emotions and assumptions that might be experienced during an encounter, which allows them to trust one another (De Koven, 1978) and to anticipate how their reactions might impact a similar situation. Through lived experience they can imagine interactions with faculty, parents, and students as individuals. Secondly, the experience exhibits play and uncertainty as tools of art educational practice, which members use to heighten their reflexivity to the needs of their real-life communities. Lastly, considering what it might feel like to be “other”, and experiencing the interference of their assumptions with their efforts to be an effective educator, members are more willing to consider alternative perspectives on what “should” occur in a given situation, and to tailor their interactions in educational communities towards open-mindedness.

Professional development. The development of empathy and understanding this experience prompts would improve the practice of professionals in different roles within educational communities. Though participants strive to improve their own practices, school-sponsored professional development meetings are generally geared specifically towards the concerns of grade level teachers.
The techniques we applied could be used across a broader range to help faculty step out of their comfort zones and gain a more informed opinion of how education appears from alternative perspectives. New groups might share professional traits to allow for communal understandings between them from the start, such as shared space on a teaching team, common roles (such as being administrators or 2nd grade teachers), or a focus on specific student populations. However, as Nietzsche (1977) says, knowledge means "something strange will be traced back to something familiar" (p.68), which means that there must be a balance wherein there are enough similarities to craft a community of play and enough diversity to disrupt the assumptions members would be inclined to make.

**Modifications for meaningful play**

In order to more effectively function as both a media of inquiry in arts-based research and as an educational tool, there are modifications to the American freeform techniques I employ that could develop its versatility further. These changes will alter the shape of the discourse to bring to the fore new themes and insights within new communities of play. In plotting that course I refer again to the schema of rules, play, and culture (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.6) for the creation of meaningful play.

**Rules: Diversity in facilitation.** This modification is partially based on Freire’s (2005) claim that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72).
As the sole facilitator, there is disproportionate weight given to my voice and ideals as compared to other members, which naturally limits the direction the experiences may follow. Therefore an important modification is the recruitment of a diverse group of additional facilitators who represent several alternative perspectives. Doing so decentralizes the authority of the researcher, invites additional experiences to inform the diegetic construction and communal discourse, and allows for the community to operate with a larger number of participants. The community of facilitators will work collaboratively to adjust the structure of the games within a larger community of participants, and will change places every few games to avoid becoming too static in its approach.

**Play: Varied participants.** Participants not connected to art education at The Ohio State University should be recruited, as a shared context encourages particular practices and modes of thought about art education. A larger community might have a wider variation of context to provide points of comparison between members. The larger pool would present opportunities for the creation of a complex diegetic world, and incorporate a broader set of experiences to draw on and learn from. While having more participants would be unlikely to equate to “better” play, a varied amount of members would affect the sets of affordances that a community could experiment with.

Furthermore, the introduction of participants presents an opportunity for active dialogue, which “is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity, but actively defend it, and thus grow together” (Freire, 1998, p. 248)
**Culture: Varied contexts.** Having used *What to do about Michael?* as a framework, we established pre-existing themes for players to work with that largely focused on the discourse of power. This works well for our community of play, but there may be additional arcs for a community to pursue that engage with a range of different ideas. There are three ways in which these alternative settings might be explored: repetition, altered foci, and altered contexts. The choice of whether or not to pursue these options would be decided upon by the community of play engaged in the experience.

**Repetition.** A community could re-enact the same premise more than once, but replay the scenario with different characters and in a different context. Instead of The Indigo School, for example, they might be at an urban public school called John Blue Elementary. This approach allows a community to ask, as John Paul suggests, “what stayed the same and why?”, to recognize what themes stay consistent despite their variations. However it would be possible for participants to feel “burned out” if one set of mechanics were used overmuch, so this technique would work best when there is a break planned to occur between scenarios.

**Altered foci.** The community would actively decide to pursue narratives that they had left unexplored and to avoid the ones that had begun as central to the experience. The narrative could involve the exit of a character for various reasons (such as graduation or leaving town to be with an ailing relative), which would give the community an opportunity to consider what happens when new characters disrupt old routines.
This approach would work best for a community of play that was devoted to an extended exploration of a context, though they should be mindful of the need for more decisive modification in order for the games to continue to be productive for them.

**Altered contexts.** This would move the context of the game out of the familiar environment of American educational communities to allow a community to push against its conceptual borders. When the context is changed to a different country the community would explore cross-cultural ideas, while if the games were set in institutions such as a hospital or courtroom it would enable them to consider questions specific to those areas. The difficulty in applying this technique is that it requires participants to have some connection to the realms they wish to explore, or else that they research those realms, as it would be easy for assumptions and stereotypes to dominate play performed without those adaptations. This would run counter to the intent of the research, as it would isolate and alienate a culture and remove the actions, experiences, and reflections that make the work meaningful (Freire, 1998).

It can be done thoughtfully though, as it was in the game *Till death do us part*, by the Norwegian organization Fantasiforbundet and the Palestinian group The Peace and Freedom Forum (PFF) (Khalil, 2015). In the game’s narrative, a Norwegian man and Palestinian woman are to be married, but their friends and family are unfamiliar with the traditions each fiancé’s culture. Because the families want to unite and celebrate, characters engage in a series of celebratory activities that allow them to get to know one another better.
Conclusion

My research pushes against the boundaries of experience, and in that reaching there is understanding to be found. That understanding encourages members to visualize how they are connected to one another, to glimpse at the differences that they make every day, and to envision the ones they have not yet made. It could not have been accomplished alone, and the experience helped us forge a community even while it explored what the word “community” means for its members. It is my hope that the effects of this research will not end with my efforts, and me but that it will inspire other artists, educators, and researchers to push against their boundaries, and to reach towards possibilities I haven’t begun to fathom. To those who do, I repeat Greene’s (1998) urging to transfigure the familiar into something different enough “to make those who are awakened hear and see” (p.129), and to recognize that in so doing they awaken themselves.
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Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, & Sessions, 2006, p. 46. Citation refers to


Appendix A: Preparatory game experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Game</th>
<th>Context Game Occurred In</th>
<th>Number of Players</th>
<th>My Familiarity With Players</th>
<th>My Role in the Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| *The Tribunal*  
By J. Harviainen | Games conference, convention center. | Eleven. | Played games with four of the players previously. | Player. I had heard of the game before, but not played it. |
| *Previous Occupants*  
By E. Ostergaard & T. Wrigstad | Games conference, convention center. | Five. | Played at least one game with each of the other players previously. | Player. Little preparation & no foreknowledge of the setting, plot, or characters. This was all explained shortly before play began. |
| *The Tribunal*  
By J. Harviainen | Residence of a player. | Five. | Knew all the players well, and had gamed with all but one of them regularly. | Facilitator-player. I advertised this game, chose the players, arranged for the space, & facilitated play. |
| *Monsterhearts*  
By J. Stavropoulos, T. Romero, & K. Scott | Academic conference, small theatre. | Eleven. | Knew two players, and was familiar with the written work of two others. | Player. I was familiar with the themes and tropes it worked with. The narrative emerged through play. |

Table 2: Preparatory game experiences (1 of 2)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Game</th>
<th>Context Game Occurred In</th>
<th>Number of Players</th>
<th>My Familiarity With Players</th>
<th>My Role in the Game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Climb</em> By J. Morningstar</td>
<td>On the OSU campus.</td>
<td>Six.</td>
<td>Knew and had gamed with all but one player.</td>
<td>Facilitator-player. I advertised this game, chose the players, arranged for the space, &amp; facilitated play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Climb</em> By J. Morningstar</td>
<td>Games conference, convention center.</td>
<td>Seven.</td>
<td>I had played one game with two of the players, and did not know them outside of that context.</td>
<td>Facilitator. Though normally in this game the facilitator is also a player, I modified it for this experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Carnival Arcane</em> By FYI</td>
<td>Games conference, convention center.</td>
<td>Thirteen.</td>
<td>I had never met any of the players.</td>
<td>I played in this game with no foreknowledge of the setting, plot, or characters. This was revealed during the course of the game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All Hail The Pirate Queen</em> By K. Jones</td>
<td>On the OSU campus.</td>
<td>Nine.</td>
<td>I knew and had played games with all but two of the players.</td>
<td>I organized the event and played a character. I did not facilitate the experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Preparatory game experiences (2 of 2)
Appendix B: What to do about Michael? American freeform game

What to do about Michael?

A Freeform Game of Power & Knowledge

By Jason Cox

Background

What to do About Michael? was originally created as a method for a class in which I was tasked with presenting the work and theories of Michel Foucault, and the version presented here is only slightly modified from that incarnation. In my research for the presentation I had realized that while it was easy to admit that Foucault’s beliefs about authority, power, and knowledge were visibly at work in our own society, it was also very easy to believe that one could or did exist outside that system and to view it only as an abstract. The game was constructed to be an embodied experience to illustrate the insidious and pervasive nature of authority, and to highlight its effects on individual lives. Originally the game included a presentation and incorporated discussions of other philosophers as a part of the debrief.

Players: As few as three and as many as 15 players.

Time: Roughly one and a half hours, not counting any reading players do in advance.
**Props/Sets:** Some sort of bag for holding the narrative cards (included) is required. This game is designed to be played around a table or in a classroom-like environment. Name tags or standees are recommended and it is also suggested that some form of roster with the names of characters is made visible to all players.

**Readings and transparency:** While not every narrative event about “Michael” is known to every player before play begins, transparency the most important element to this game. All players should be aware of the subject matter going in and ought to be allowed to familiarize themselves with Foucault’s works ahead of time.

**Introduction:** In this game players all to assume the role of a teacher at a private school named The Cobalt School. Within the school is a student named Michael who has been having some trouble, though his grades (other than Math) are consistently good. The role-play narrative begins at a faculty meeting just after Michael has assaulted another student, in which teachers, staff, and administrators discuss how to respond to the event.

**Character creation workshop (15 minutes):** The first step is to create an alternate identity for each player. This step can be online or on a different day then the rest of the game. Players should keep in mind that this identity will influence the lens through which they will be viewing Michael and life at The Cobalt School. To create this identity, each player answers the questions below. Make sure to write the answers down, as it can be surprisingly easy to forget what you have chosen. Whoever is facilitating the game should take on the role of an authority figure, such as a guidance counselor, the head of the school, or Michael’s homeroom teacher.
This player will start and end the different segments of play, and help orchestrate character creation and the debrief. At the end of creation, take a moment and allow each player to introduce their character. If possible, all the answers should be collected and presented as part of a public roster.

**Questions:**

1. What is your name?
2. What do you teach/what is your role at the school? (It is possible to share a role as co-teachers or co-administrators.)
3. How would your character identify themselves? (You can be from any gender, class, or geographic origin you care to be.)
4. What is your family situation? (ie marital status and description of any children)
5. How long have you taught at The Cobalt School, and how do you feel about it?

**Introduction of Narratives (10 minutes):** First, the facilitator reads the following to the entire group:

“Michael began attending The Cobalt School at the beginning of this year. His records indicate that he had always been near the top of his class until last year, when his grades took a precipitous drop. At The Cobalt school he has done quite well academically, except in math in which he is a little weak. Michael’s parents are both professionals. His father is a doctor who often works with charities across the state, and his mother is a business woman. Michael also has an older sister and a younger brother, both attending other schools.”
Included in this document are a series of narrative cards, inspired by events that occurred to Michel Foucault while he was in school. For every five players put you will need one copy of each card. Put all the narrative cards included in this document and put them in a bag. Each player takes one card, and doesn’t look at it until every other player in the game has one. The card describes an event the player’s character saw or participated in that involved Michael, and each card asks how that character reacted at the time. Players should feel free to “tinker” with the narratives so they fit the broader narrative they have created for their imaginary role. For now, the event and its answers are kept secret but will be discussed in the “faculty meeting” that follows. The exception to that is that if any player drew the “Aggression” card they should read it aloud. If more than one player drew this card, than they were all present at the same event. If no player drew this card, then every player draws another narrative describing an event they witnessed. This process repeats until an “Aggression” card is drawn, and the “Faculty Meeting” begins.

**Faculty Meeting (60 minutes)**: Whoever is facilitating is responsible for beginning and ending the “Faculty Meeting” segment, during which for the most part all players should be “in character”. The character the facilitator is playing should begin the meeting by stating that they are there to discuss Michael’s behavior and what the appropriate response to recent events would be, before opening it up to the floor so that different players can talk about the things they saw or heard.
Any undefined information about Michael, The Cobalt School, or any other characters can be stated as fact during play by any character, and it then becomes reality so far as the game is concerned. For example: a player may state that Michael’s father works in a fast food restaurant; or that their character missed a particular meeting because of a sprained ankle; or that The Cobalt School has an extracurricular group a character thinks Michael should participate in. If play diverges from the topic at hand, let it. Likewise, players should feel free to try to whisper to each other while (theoretically) only one person should be speaking. School faculty meetings are rarely as focused as they are supposed to be.

The facilitator ends the meeting after sixty minutes. It cannot be longer, because the teachers have classes they have to attend to, and if it is shorter it will give the appearance that they have not given the question due consideration.

**Break (5 minutes):** Take a short break and allow players to quietly think about the experience they just shared, use the bathroom, and get a drink of water.

**Debrief (15 minutes):** The debrief is a chance to validate experiences, make meaning of the game, and discuss areas that may be troubling emotionally. In order to begin the process, consider asking every player to take a minute or two to write down immediate thoughts at the end of the play, without saying anything to anyone. Whether they will share what they write or not is up to them, but it gives a starting point for discussion. Then use some of the sample questions below to guide the direction of the conversation.
Don’t worry if it veers off track, that just means play was meaningful in a different manner than was anticipated! Also, feel free to go out socially after the end of the game and continue talking.

**Suggested Discussion Questions:**

- When did you feel supported by another player or character?
- What is something you will be glad to leave in the game?
- How did the game connect to your own experiences?
- Do you feel any different about the nature of authority now than you did before? Why or why not?
- What do you think happened next for Michael? For your characters? For The Cobalt School?
### Taunting

During a class discussion, Michael responded to a statement by another student named James with a scathingly sarcastic comment. The whole class laughed about it and truthfully Michael’s observation was very perceptive and humorous, but James was clearly very embarrassed and upset about the ridicule he received.

What exactly happened?
How did you respond?
Who did you involve? (Both students, parents, administrators, etc.)

### Disruption

While trying to teach, Michael keeps calling out a commentary on your subject that the class finds highly amusing. You know Michael has had trouble making friends, but his interruptions are also eating into your class time and putting things off-schedule.

What did you do?
What kind of an effect does it have on Michael?
What would you do if the situation worsened?

### Disturbing Images

While he is packing up at the end of the school day, you see inside of Michael’s locker a series of images most people would consider dark or disturbing, focusing largely on themes of death and despair, that he has decorated the interior with.

What, if anything, did you say to him?
Does this information change how you think about or interact with Michael?

### Difficulties at Home

One day when Michael is being dropped off by his father at school you can hear them having a loud and aggressive argument. Michael leaves the car, yelling once more at his father before slamming the door and stomping into the school. You have not actually ever talked to the father as his work keeps him out of town most of the time and unable to come to conferences, but Michael’s mother has mentioned his concern about his son’s focus on the humanities instead of science.

Did you bring up the fight? If so, who with?
Does this affect how you engage with Michael academically?
### Isolation

While you have observed that other students laugh at the sarcastic comments Michael offers during classes, he does not seem particularly well liked, and you have noticed that he doesn’t seem to hang out with the other children very much. Over the course of several of your recess duties you have observed his absence, and have discovered that he has been instead going to hide in the school library.

Why do you think this might be going on?
How did you deal with this?
Who did you involve?

### Depression

Michael confides in you that he has been feeling very depressed, to the point of considering harming himself. During the discussion it becomes clear that at least part of his depression is linked to his emerging identity as a homosexual. However, he also says he is desperate to keep this from being common knowledge. He especially wants to avoid his family, notably his father, from finding out about it.

What did you do about this?
How does it affect your relationship with Michael?

### Aggression

In between classes one day you see Michael chasing another student with scissors. The other student, James, is one whom Michael has often argued with before. The school security guard breaks up the fight and Michael is temporarily suspended. It is decided there will be a teacher’s meeting to discuss the situation.

Be prepared to talk about Michael in class!
Appendix C: *Troupe* American freeform game.

*Troupe*

By Jason Cox

Special thanks to George Locke for his advice and mentorship

**Players:** *Troupe* can accommodate as few as 3 players and as many as 8, but the ideal number is 5 (including the facilitator).

**Time:** 2 hours

**Props:** The game requires some sort of device for timing. If possible, play in a space that has lights and furniture you can manipulate. Ideally a selection of masks, puppets, or dolls would also be available, but these are optional.

**Introduction:**

Good afternoon boys and girls, and welcome to the humble company of *Little D’s Travelling Storytime, Inc!* In this game, players take on the roles of performers in a children’s theatre group at the end of the season. The game’s story primarily evolves in two arenas: firstly within performances for the benefit of an imagined audience, where in theory the “real” personalities and relationships of the characters are subsumed by the roles they play; secondly in the “real” world, in which the characters encounter the frustrations of touring and of seeing other people non-stop for an extended period.
Troupe begins with the characters heading out to their final two shows of the season, and ends during their return trip.

**Backstory:**

*Troupe* is based on the author’s memories from his time as a touring puppeteer in 1999-2002. The archetypes are each drawn from the repertoire of shows his troupe performed, the roles from their responsibilities at the shows, and the events from things that really occurred over the course of his time in the troupe..

**Character Creation: (15 minutes)**

- **Management:** One player takes the role of Management, and assumes several responsibilities:
  - Firstly, Management facilitates play by taking the lead in understanding the rules and orchestrating character creation with the other players. If there is any uncertainty about how play should proceed, it is up to Management to resolve it.
  - Management is also a character who is back at the Troupe’s “home base”, and generally exists “off-screen. Management answers the phones, handles whatever problems can be resolved from a distance, and signs the checks… unless a client fails to pay, in which case things may be pretty lean for a while.
Management is responsible for beginning and ending of the prologue and each act, which they do by clapping and applauding the other players. This is generally a matter of keeping time so that play stays within the allotted time, but Management can also extend or shorten a scene if it seems to fit the dramatic needs of the game.

The flow of time within a scene is also subject to manipulation by Management, and they may have the troupe replay an act or a portion of an act. This should only be done to serve dramatic play, and not as an exercise of control. It is also important that the elements of the act determined by the troupe remain in place, which in general means that Management shouldn’t fast forward to a new scene or rewind to a point before the established background.

If other non-player roles are necessary, Management can assume those roles. If the game is in a public area and passers-by consent, management may also conscript them to into additional roles. Examples of these might be the manager of a theatre, a waiter in a restaurant, the cop who pulled the Troupe over for having a busted headlight, etc. These roles should always be created in reaction to a situation the Troupe itself has devised.
• **The Troupe:** Every other player is a member of the performing troupe, and has an archetype, an attribute, and a role to define. There are nametags included with this document that include a space to record these choices. There are also some questions that will need to be answered about their relationship with the troupe.

  o **Archetypes:** Each player will select one of these archetypes: Queen, Dreamer, Wolf, Mouse, Knight, Gnome, Buffalo. The names of the archetypes serve as the names of the troupe members, and describe their “real” personality, though the terms may also apply to the roles they take on before an audience. The archetypes are chosen in the order presented, so someone must volunteer to be Queen before someone else can be Dreamer. Also, as an effect of this a game with two players and Management will only have Queen and Dreamer in the troupe. Technically Management is also a character, just one whom is generally absent from play.

  o **Roles:** Each player except for management will choose a role that describes the troupe member’s responsibilities during a show, as well as their function in this game. These roles are: Lighting, Sets, Props, and Costumes. The last person to pick their archetype will be the first person to choose a role, and so on in reverse order back to the Queen. Each role must have at least one member assigned to it before any role is allowed to have two.
If there are fewer than four players, then some will assume additional roles. At the beginning of each act, on or off stage, these roles answer specific questions.

- **Lighting:** A player in the lighting role will determine what happened right before an act begins.

- **Sets:** The Sets role decides where exactly the action will be taking place in this act.

- **Costumes:** During a performance, the Costumes role decides what role each troupe member will be playing. When the characters are “off-stage”, the Costumes player determines the emotional state of the characters at the beginning of the act.

- **Props:** Props creates a point of conflict for the characters, determining the current situation and setting in motion the actions that are follow.

- **Context:** Each member of the troupe has been with *Little D’s Travelling Storytime, Inc!* for at least the length of this season, and they know each other reasonably well. The questions below are meant to clarify their relationship with the company, which in turn may affect their relationships with other characters. The questions are intentionally broad and subject to interpretation, but some sub-questions have been included to suggest possible directions they might be taken.
- **How long have you been performing?** This could mean as a general description of how much of a character’s life has been spent on stage, but could also relate specifically to their time with *Little D’s Travelling Storytime, Inc!*

- **Why are you here?** Performing does not pay well, has few benefits, and involves a lot of stressful situations, so why does your character do it? What particular skills does the character bring to the Troupe? Are there relationships that drew them there in the first place?

- **Where do you see your future?** Are you devoted to helping the company succeed? Was it a stepping stone to something bigger? Are you going back to school to finish your degree?

- **What kinds of subject matter will the performances include?** Are we doing drug addiction awareness or fairy tales? This last question should be considered as a group, and might take slightly longer to answer.

  o **Traits:** Each player picks one trait of the three listed beside their archetype on the list below to focus their character on. Players then begin a story about a time this season when that trait came into play, but partway through stops and asks one of the other players to finish the story in a way that portrays the trait as an asset.
They then repeat the process with a different player, but this time the trait is described as creating complications instead. For example, Queen says, “I recall being very direct with Summer Camp’s director about nailing down a booking, since he was waffling about what their facilities were, but it didn’t work out very well, did it Wolf?” Wolf responds, “No. The guy said they had a PA system, but it was totally busted and our soundtrack didn’t work, and, since we didn’t bring any musical instruments, we all sang a capella and it was awful.” After either story a short exchange might follow to further develop the relationship between the characters.

- **Queen**- ambitious, direct, regal
- **Dreamer**- creative, eccentric, curious
- **Wolf**- passionate, competitive, magnetic
- **Mouse**- quiet, thoughtful, pacifist
- **Knight**- loyal, honor-bound, impetuous
- **Gnome**- old, sneaky, cautious
- **Buffalo**- strong, imposing, reactive
• **Setting the stage**

  o Play consists of a prologue and 4 acts, two of which happen “on stage” and two of which happen off. Each act begins with the roles “setting the scene” by selecting, in the order listed below, what the exact situation characters will be playing. If two players share a role, then they should collaboratively decide on this choice. The process of setting the stage should be completed in under five minutes, after which Management indicates that action begins by applauding. Once time has elapsed Management applauds again to let the players know the act is over.

  o **1st- Lighting:** Lighting characters determine the time for the act. This could be the hour, season, or an event that is occurring during the act. In terms of play, this means that Lighting also determines what has just happened right before an act begins. If the group has the ability to control the lighting, Lighting players should adjust it to match their chosen time as closely as possible.

  o **2nd- Sets:** Players in the Sets role determine the place in which the act will take place. When “on stage” this can be more or less anywhere, but “off stage” it is confined to more realistic locales. This location will be most effective if it is in some way connected with the time as determined by Lighting. For example, if a vehicle has just been in an accident then the side of the road, a garage, or a hospital might all provide great opportunities for play.
If the environment you are playing in has easily movable elements, like pillows or chairs, players in the Sets role should alter them to match the location they describe for other players.

- **3rd- Costumes:** When characters are “on stage”, players in the Costumes role assign them characters to enact that are consistent with the time and place determined by Lights and Sets. If the group has access to puppets, masks, or dolls, they may also pass those out at this time to appropriate character. When characters are “off stage”, players in the Costumes role selects an emotional state for each player to begin the act in. Since the number of players is variable, these emotions may be repeated as often as necessary and arranged in any order. For example, three players could be “Tired” one “Smitten” and the last one “Pumped” or alternately they could all share the “Smitten” state, which could create an even more complex scene.

- **4th- Props:** In *Troupe* the players in the Props role gets to present a conflict for the characters, one which integrates the choices from the other three roles. “On stage” this encompasses the overarching action, such as an entry into Wonderland or rescuing captives from Captain Hook. “Off stage” this refers to events that complicate the lives of the troupe, such as Queen arranging gigs that involve long stretches of driving because he is frustrated that nobody else helps with the bookings.
Where Sets has described what happened “before” Props defines what is happening “now”, though a player in this role should be careful to suggest conflicts rather than directing actions.

- Here is an example of how the stage might be set drawn from Act 1, which thematically focuses on new beginnings:
  - Lighting- “As the curtain raises, it is a fresh spring morning just after a light rain. It has been a hard winter, and the the darkest day of that winter was the passing of the beloved Queen.”
  - Sets- “A sleepy town on the outskirts of the kingdom wakes to the sound of laughter and merriment in the streets. They bustle with activity even though the sun has barely risen.”
  - Costumes- (Indicating players with each selection) “Twin girls dance in circles around their father, the apple seller, and their mother, who is secretly of royal blood.”
  - Props- “Today the kingdom is celebrating news from an Oracle that a new Queen will be found within a fortnight. Her reign is foretold to bring great prosperity to the land, though she will not live to see it.”
• **Scene Structure** (70 minutes)
  
  o Below are rough descriptions of the theme and events surrounding each act, as well as some suggestions that players in each role may choose from to set the stage. Players are encouraged to use their own ideas or to tailor the examples provided, but in doing so they ought to keep the theme of each act in mind.

  o **Prologue- Hitting the road** (10 minutes)
    
    ▪ In the prologue the troupe has just left the studio to drive for two days to get to their last two shows for the season. It is early morning, and Queen is driving. Use this as a time to get to know the characters and how they interact with each other.

  o **Act 1- On Stage** (20 minutes)
    
    ▪ In Act 1 the Troupe is doing its second to last performance, with Management sitting in as the audience. The act is thematically linked to the idea of beginnings and innocence.

    ▪ **Lighting**- Dawn. Spring after a long winter. A holiday after a grim time.

    ▪ **Sets**- In a quiet village. In a large house. In a deep, dark forest.

    ▪ **Costumes**- Children and playmates. Talking animals. Fairies of every description.

    ▪ **Props**- A festive public event. An exploration of a new realm. A visitation by someone or something not seen in living memory.
- **Act 2- Off Stage** (20 minutes)
  - Act 2 occurs between the two performances, but can be at any point in that time span, such as immediately after the performance in Act 1 or just before the performance in Act 2. Thematically Act 2 is about a gathering tension and diminishing control.
  - **Lighting**- Late Afternoon, having finally finished driving. Smack in the middle of rush hour. Mealtime, just after the food has been ordered.
  - **Sets**- Backstage after the end of the show in Act 1. In a hotel with the TV on. At a fast food diner.
  - **Costumes**- Pumped and excited. Exhausted or bored. Utterly smitten.
  - **Props**- Running out of money for gas or food. Mechanical trouble. Bad reviews or other professional challenges.

- **Act 3- On Stage** (20 minutes)
  - Act 3 occurs at least a day later than Act 1, and in a different venue (though it may be close by). It is the very last show of the season, and thematically represents a point of uncertainty and disequilibrium.
  - **Lighting**- Twilight, right as the street lights come on. The Witching Hour. Just after the music stops.
- **Sets**- In a foreboding castle. Deep underground, with only the light of a torch. In a large, empty area, surrounded by the sound of wind.

- **Costumes**- Spirits re-enacting their death. Warriors on the eve of battle. Musicians, performing before a mighty and temperamental king.

- **Props**- An uncertain rescue. A confrontation of personal flaws. An escape from a doomed world.

- Act 4- **Off Stage** (20 minutes)
  - Act 4 may occur at any point after the show in Act 3, but before the official end of the summer. It is possible that some, or all, of the troupe members will not be coming back next year. Act 4 represents endings, good and bad, but also the possibility of new beginnings.

- **Lighting**- Midnight on New Year’s Eve. Just before everyone goes to sleep. Right after all the bars have closed.

- **Sets**- In the van for the last time this season. In a movie theatre, during the end credits. Back in the studio and putting away the materials until next season.

- **Costumes**- Abandoned and lonely. Optimistic for the future. Nostalgic about an event from this past season.

- **Props**- A death in a troupe member’s family. The end of a relationship. Medical trouble.
• **Debrief** (15 minutes)
  
  o The debrief is a chance to validate experiences, make meaning of the game, and discuss areas that may be troubling emotionally. It can be hard to anticipate how exactly to do that, but the “outsider” perspective Management occupies in *Troupe* should give that player the chance to pay attention to verbal and physical cues to facilitate that discourse in a way that can be difficult for players. In order to begin the process, consider having every player (including Management) take a minute or two to write down immediate thoughts at the end of the play, without saying anything to anyone. Whether they will share what they write or not is up to them, but it gives a starting point for discussion. Then use some of the sample questions below to guide the direction of the conversation. Don’t worry if it veers off track, that just means play was meaningful in a different manner than was anticipated! Also, feel free to go out socially after the end of the game and continue talking.
  
  o **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

    - When did you feel supported by another player or character?
    - What is something you will be glad to leave in the game?
    - How did the game connect to your own experiences?
    - Which act felt the most meaningful to you, and why?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Archetype:</th>
<th>Name/Archetype:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Queen</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dreamer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role (Circle One):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Role (Circle One):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</td>
<td>Lighting, Sets, Costumes, Props</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trait (Circle one):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Trait (Circle one):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious, Direct, Regal</td>
<td>Creative, Eccentric, Curious</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Mouse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role (Circle One):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Role (Circle One):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Trait (Circle one):</strong></td>
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<td>Quiet, Thoughtful, Pacifist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knight</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gnome</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td><strong>Role (Circle One):</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Trait (Circle one):</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td>Loyal, Honor-bound, Impetuous</td>
<td>Old, Sneaky, Cautious</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Buffalo</strong></td>
<td><strong>Management</strong></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Role (Circle One):</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Trait (Circle one):</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong, Imposing, Reactive</td>
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### Appendix D: Cast of characters in The Indigo School

Table 4: Cast of characters (1 of 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Self-ID</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Time at School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Sean Mitchell</td>
<td>Interim Principal</td>
<td>White male, upper middle class.</td>
<td>Married for 37 years.</td>
<td>2 months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Danielle Scott</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
<td>From the local area, white female, upper middle class, inheritance.</td>
<td>Early 30’s, single, with no children.</td>
<td>10 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Gerald Bloom</td>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>White male, poor.</td>
<td>Widower, two girls ages 8 (Zoe) and 10 (Caleigh).</td>
<td>3 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Jenny Fairborn</td>
<td>2nd Grade Teacher, Soccer Coach</td>
<td>White, female, single, middle class.</td>
<td>Early 30’s, single, no children.</td>
<td>3 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. W.R. Bechtle</td>
<td>7th and 8th Grade History Teacher/Farmer</td>
<td>White male, Proud poor, Accidental racist</td>
<td>Married, 6 kids.</td>
<td>22 years. Hates the changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Pearson</td>
<td>7th Grade Student</td>
<td>Hayley (Sister), Simon (Brother), Jim (Father), Barb (Mother).</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James McComb</td>
<td>7th Grade Student</td>
<td>Janice (mother), Frank (Father)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Janice McComb</td>
<td>Parent, Head of the PTO.</td>
<td>James (Son), Frank (Husband)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Bob Stevens (Stev-Ins)</td>
<td>New Superintendent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayley Pearson</td>
<td>8th Grade Student</td>
<td>Michael (Brother), Simon (Brother), Jim (Father), Barb (Mother).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: Cast of characters (2 of 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Self-ID</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Time at School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon Pearson</td>
<td>2nd Grade Student</td>
<td></td>
<td>Michael (Brother), Hayley (Sister), Jim (Father), Barb (Mother).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Barbara (Barb) Pearson</td>
<td>Parent, Businesswoman</td>
<td></td>
<td>Barb (Wife), Hayley (Daughter) Michael (Son), Simon (Son).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. James (Jim) Pearson</td>
<td>Parent, Doctor</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jim (Husband), Hayley (Daughter) Michael (Son), Simon (Son).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel Gates</td>
<td>7th Grade Student</td>
<td>Tall and nerdy smartass.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cory Smith</td>
<td>7th Grade Student</td>
<td>Artist and jock.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava Knight</td>
<td>7th Grade Student</td>
<td>Tricia’s best friend.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tricia Jones</td>
<td>7th Grade Student</td>
<td>James’ girlfriend.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank McComb</td>
<td>Parent</td>
<td></td>
<td>James (Son), Janice (Wife)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: In vivo codes

- Where do power relations affect discourse in an educational community?
  - Power/Responsibility of knowledge
    - Fear/Insecurity
  - Parents/Guardians
    - Fear loss of control
    - Guilt at absence
  - Students
    - Loss of faith in others
    - Upper School Desire for Colleagues, not Commanders
  - Self-Worth
  - Unintentional Exercises of Power
    - Resulting guilt
      - Hurting Loved Ones
      - Guilt/Depression Cycle
  - Forms of Power
    - Influence/Non-authorial Power
    - “Help” as a relationship of power
      - Professional obligations to help inhibit trust
  - Teachers
    - Responsibility
      - To students
        - Openness and Awareness
          - Teacher perceptions of student popularity are not necessarily accurate
            - A student can be perceived as popular while not feeling so internally.
          - Limitations on what is knowable
            - Doesn’t diminish importance of facts
            - Professional limitations on friendship with students
        - Teaching empathy to students
          - Not being a bully
- Decentering self
  - The line between “bully” and “authority”
- To colleagues
  - Stay positive with each other
    - Focus on the students
- Teacher perceptions of students
  - Default perception of normal
    - “Normal” is “healthy”
      - Difficulties result from conflicting norms
    - Teenagers are self-interested
    - Teenagers don’t know what is good for them, but think they do.
      - This causes resentment
- Perceptions of sexuality
  - Wary of imposing sexual identity, but suspicious of student ability to do so.
- Perceptions of race
  - Perceptions of race affect perceptions of students
    - Awareness encourages resistance
- Staff/faculty interactions with parents
  - Frustration can lead to irrational or unprofessional actions
    - Belief that the parents are uninvolved in schooling
      - Leads to preconceived judgments
        - Leads to interactions that appear to disrespect towards parents
    - Long term frustration with school culture
    - Challenges to authority and competence turn discourse into an argument to “win”, and prove authority.
      - Wording makes a difference, but exhibiting compassion makes a greater one.
        - A contest for dominance will overshadow any valid points being made
    - Experienced educators may act to overcome frustration.
  - Different forms of educational thought encourage different interactions with parents.
    - Older administrators tend to be more authoritative
    - Younger administrators tend to emphasize a more democratic mindset
- Staff/faculty interactions with each other
- Rely on each other for professional support
  - Encourage actions and thoughts among each other that are counter to regular impulses
    - Interactions are based in the intersection of personal boundaries, which sometimes have different affordances.
- Faculty and staff may draw on each other for help with personal issues
  - Who is asked for help on a personal problem is a matter of opportunity as well as trust
    - Asking for help is sometimes more difficult because it runs counter to the community member’s professional image or self-image
  - This can be exceedingly difficult
- What is “best” for a school
  - The assumed viewpoint of veterans and others in positions of authority are presumed to represent what is “best” for a school
    - This viewpoint is often at odds with what is “best” for an individual
    - The systems a community has in place facilitate actions that align with the established authority.
    - There is a tension between acting upon what an individual might do and what an individual has done.
      - The bias is to view what a person might do as an impediment to education
        - This may be modified by the particular details
        - Resorting to extreme consequences, even if those consequences are known, does not seem “fair” to students.
      - The governing body of a school tend to believe that individuals with difficulties will flourish in a different context
        - In this view, keeping the student in the current context is in nobody’s interest
          - While this might be the case, the fact that the school is acting in its own interest skews their perspective
  - Role of gender among educators
• Male educators
  o Confrontation with other males
    ▪ Dominance among males
      • Silencing effect on female colleagues
  o Subordination of Males to Female Groups
    ▪ Intimidation
      • Gendered Conversation as Power
  o Lack of Male Educators
    ▪ Lack of “balance”
    ▪ Traits of potential male educators
      • Love of children
        o Non-threatening appearance
          ▪ Weird
      ▪ Lack of Male Art Educators
  • Female Educators
  o Social relationship with each other
    ▪ Often aggressive
    ▪ Often exclude male educators
      • Through avoidance
      • Through subject matter
  o Female Art Educators
    ▪ Generally white women.
  • Role of race among educators
  o Lack of representation in education
  o Lack of representation in art education programs

• Families
  o The “normal” family
  • Façade
    o Maintained through communal effort
      ▪ Public Face versus Private
      ▪ The united front
      • Hiding points of disagreement or disjunction feels the same as projecting strength.
        o A threat to that strength escalates the level of response
    o Disruption makes illusion visible
      ▪ Disruption in one context affects community perception/interaction in another
  • Contradicts “common experience”

• Parents
Role at school

- Semi-administrative roles have a high degree of influence
  - That influence is partly dependent upon the parent existing “outside” of the hierarchical structure of the school
    - Because this role has little oversight, it can easily be abused
    - Because the position counters the internal hierarchy of a school, that hierarchy can be perceived as an “other” to be combatted
      - Or alternatively replaced

- To protect
  - The united front
    - Protecting the child means being unyielding
      - Because protection is quick and forceful, it is normally pointed at people and issues with high impact
    - Criticism of a family member is seen as an attack.
      - Regardless of circumstance

- To control/guide
  - Parents nurture by providing activities they believe to be appropriate
    - Family members have different ideas on what is appropriate
      - Families with money will readily use it to secure appropriate outlets

Parent interactions with teachers

- Parents are very concerned with their children
  - Sometimes this makes them unreasonable

- Parents want to collaborate with schools, not be told what to do
  - A contest for dominance appears to be a show of strength, but obscures goals.
    - It makes the faculty and staff less accommodating

- Parents feel like the time and effort they put towards their child’s education, and their knowledge of their child, is under appreciated

- Parents want to see investment in their child, specifically
  - They require proof of this investment to believe it exists
    - If they do not see this proof, it will not be seen as fair.
• When called to the school, parents are expecting to be attacked.
  ▪ Children are simulacra, not Duplicates
  o Students
    ▪ Assumptions based on experience
      ▪ Perceived importance is relative to lived experience
    ▪ Assumptions based on role assigned to “other”
    ▪ Developmental stages provide reason/alibi for changes
      ▪ Every student develops differently, and with different needs
        o Assumptions, declarations, or impositions of “normality” become offensive
  ▪ Teenage Identity
    ▪ Dynamic relationships
      o Resistance of authority
      o Unstable and volatile
        ▪ Exist in relationship with past and future
          ▪ Occasionally forestalled effects
        ▪ Strict allegiances
    ▪ Fitting in
      o Feeling/Not feeling safe
      o Performance of community identity
      o Hiding behind the façade
    ▪ Sexuality and identity
      o Expectations of performance of sexuality
        ▪ Indicates difference
          ▪ Sexuality linked to popularity
            o Popularity distinct from acceptance
          ▪ Indicates intelligence
          ▪ Indicates maturity
        o Popular media provides resisting/supporting examples
    ▪ Complex and intense emotions
      o Emotions are ascribed to hormones
        ▪ Hormones are used as an explanation or excuse for problematic interactions
          ▪ Intention and action exist in a state of tension
        o Gender and emotions
          ▪ Girls rely on social relationships to explore and understand emotions
  o Context and perception
    ▪ Charter/Public schools have different priorities
- Public schools believe they are the only option for a student’s education
  - Membership in a charter school educational community is both exclusive and conditional
    - Geo-political location affects acceptance
    - The lunch table functions as a dynamic social space.
    - Teacher break room
      - Juxtaposes “teacher” identity with that of “independent adult”
        - Socialization promotes emotional well-being
      - Discussions often refer to space outside educational community
        - Sometimes refer to specific issues
          - Often in ambiguous terms
            - Distinctions of grade level
              - More willing to judge a secondary level student
            - Distinctions of faculty status
              - Balance opinion and opportunity to observe
          - Forbidden “other” space to students
            - Perceived as a necessity by faculty
              - A place for secrets, and freedom
                - Being allowed to transgress space is exciting and empowering
      - Multiplex identity
        - Perspective affects understanding of identity
          - Tendency to assign roles to others based on perceptions

- How and why individuals in educational communities align themselves with the interests of particular groups (teachers, parents, administrators, staff, students, etc.)?
  - Parents as an external source of power
    - For students
    - For school authorities
      - Over students
      - Over colleagues
    - Individual needs and community needs

- How do individual art educators convey solutions to personal, professional, and relational risks?
  - Shared knowledge/responsibility
  - Role of Art
- Often perceived as “not real work”
  - Passing the torch
    - Encourage students to see art education as a potential career path
  - Community
    - Art teacher as isolated “other” to colleagues
- Whose understanding of the role or purpose of education should take precedence in educational communities?
  - Financial investment
  - Conflicting goals
    - Student
      - Diverse drives
      - Escape
      - Pressures/Expectations
      - The context education should happen in
    - Parent
      - Concern for the future
    - Administration
      - Performing leadership for multiple expectations
    - Social Investment
      - Individuals vs. Community
  - Focus of the school
    - The “well regarded arts program”
      - Contains perceived status enhancement, regardless of interest in art
      - Activities that diverge from focus are de-emphasized
- What effect does using American Freeform as a media for arts-based inquiry have for knowledge creation and the development of relationships for the participants?
  - Genesis of characters
    - How does context connect to experience?
      - Lived experience provides insight to relationships of characters
    - Roles in life determine roles in game
      - Embodiment as retribution
      - Purpose for playing affects shape of roles
    - The game necessitates certain roles
      - The techniques applied affect character development
    - Spurred by questions
- What would it be like?
- Who might I have been?
- Who am I now?
- Who do I know like this?
  - Use of model person to fill a necessary archetype

- Speech/Movement
  - Playing non-human actors
    - Emphasis on visceral qualities (movement/sound)
      - For the benefit of others
      - For the benefit of self
    - Quality of surreal/real
      - Encourages different sorts of interaction
  - Pursue distinct qualities by contrasting actions and sounds of other players
  - Awareness of environment during play impacts development
  - Portrayal of internal attributes a character possesses

- Uncertainty
  - Not having full control of character creation can provide inspiration and insight.
    - It provides a structure in which the diegetic reality begins
      - The interaction of characters at different stages of development can be disconcerting.
  - Interactions
    - Lines between character and player
      - What players know versus what characters know
        - Effects of silence
      - Character knowledge and character perception
      - Relationships with characters as mirror for real-life relationships
      - Character morality versus player morality
      - Discomfort with familiarity
        - Identifying with a character affects a player’s perception of their relationships
    - Emotional bleed
      - Bleed and perception
        - How a person sees and thinks about a character is not fixed, but is developed through play
        - The feelings characters have for one another affect how a player feels about those characters
The feelings a player has for a character affect how the characters feel about each other

- Learning from new viewpoint/experience
  - Continuing experiences help develop diegetic relationships and make them believable
    - Sometimes this is not gaining depth, but an alteration of a character’s previous beliefs or attitudes
  - A perspective developed in a role-played experience may grant insight not to just what is, but to what may be
    - Players can suggest possibly dangerous scenarios that a character would not foresee from a position of safety.
  - Experiences as a character can anticipate experiences a player may encounter
  - Experiences as a person can anticipate experiences a character may encounter
  - What would it feel like?
    - The more a community knows about a character and their inner workings, the more sympathetic they are
    - Playing a character creates investment in their experiences and encourages sympathy for their situation
      - When a player observes a character with whom they share experiences or attributes, it creates points of connection and sympathy.
    - Lack of personal experience with issue affects play
    - Questions arise
    - Affects feelings toward real-life analogs of characters
      - Connects lived experience and personal memory
        - Repeated embodiment strengthens connection
  - Discontinuity of perspective
    - Seeing interactions from multiple points of view illustrates that what a situation is “about” depends greatly on perspective
  - Change of context alters character interaction
  - Absence of character affects character interaction
    - As well as inner dialogue
  - Presence of particular characters affects play
- Develop conceptions of characters
  - Affection for characters one personally plays
  - Affection for a character someone else plays
    - Linked to how one’s character interacts with them
    - Linked to attributes the character has
  - Affected by real-world relationships
  - Understanding of relationships
    - Relationships, individuals, and community are developed through play at the same time.
- What feels “real”
  - Intense emotion
  - Lack of total control
    - Specifically of actions and emotions
- Being mimetic-adjacent
  - Undefined traits lead to interpretations based in personal experience
    - The physical appearance of a player does not automatically coincide with the character
      - Differences can, however, interfere with a suspension of disbelief
  - Understanding of context
    - If the circumstances for a scene are not specific, players interpret them to favor their characters point of view
- Community of play
  - Appreciation of community
  - Absence of a member affects play
    - Different scenes emerge from interactions
      - Anticipated events have to be re-conceptualized
      - Scenes and techniques that are viable do not so much increase or decrease, but are qualitatively changed
    - Attributes a player possesses are conspicuous by their absence
      - Gender plays a role in how those attributes are perceived
      - Different participants create a different result. Not better, just different.
      - Participants try to enact missing attributes
      - Personal connections affect perception of play
        - Awareness of difference in play

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- Awareness of a friend’s absence
  - Especially noticeable in a smaller group

- Reflection
  - Awareness of privilege
  - Recognition of unresolved issues in education
  - Declaration of beliefs
  - Learning through artifact creation
    - About the character
      - About connections between characters
        - Deepening knowledge of inter-character relationships
      - Broad themes the character evokes
        - Inter-connectivity between character, relationships, and context
    - About the character’s context and how it influences their thoughts and actions
      - How an individual characters perceive and react to context
    - About unintended connections between the player and the character
    - Connections between visual and visceral experiences
      - Includes abstract representation of internal experience
    - Visualizations of characters
      - Informed by research
        - Altering in-game perceptions
      - Assumptions based on personal experiences
  - Reflection on play
    - Playing characters makes a player invested in that character’s viewpoint
      - That viewpoint is not necessarily rational, though it may feel that way.
    - Connection between types of character a player portrays
    - Alters perception of play
      - Changes emphasis in terms of viewpoint or in terms of narrative
    - Encourages perception of entire game world
  - Reflection on personal life
    - Decisions parents faced in determining schooling
      - Repercussions of decisions
    - Commonality of problematic professional experiences
  - Development of context
    - How game design models power
• Biases particular perspective (at least at start)
  ▪ Reflexive game design
  • Environment
    o Altering lighting and sound affects intensity of experience
  • Altering the narrative
    o Misremembered information can become fact
  ▪ Anticipating the future for the characters
  • Narrative need
    o Combination of mimetic (realistic), synthetic (plot-based), and thematic (“big idea) concerns
      ▪ Desire for resolution
        • To satisfy emotional investment in characters
        • Acceptance that life has few clear-cut conclusions
          o Aspect of freeform gaming
  ▪ Application of meta-techniques
    • Adaptation of techniques to needs of the game
      o Affects level of intensity
      o Results in restrictions that have some give, rather than being strictly enforced
      o Effects vary from the source they are drawn from, even though they may be mechanically similar
    • Inventing new techniques
      o Incorporating artifact creation
    • Revisiting previous techniques
  ▪ Arising themes

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