

Review: *Playful Pedagogy in the Pandemic: Pivoting to Game-Based Learning*, by Emily K. Johnson and Anastasia Salter. 2022. Routledge. xiii + 164 pp.

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As a part of J. Michael Ryan's edited series on the COVID-19 pandemic, Emily K. Johnson and Anastasia Salter's *Playful Pedagogy in the Pandemic: Pivoting to Game-Based Learning* (2022) comes at a critical time as many students and educators continue to survey the teaching and learning landscape of the digital postsecondary classroom. Johnson and Salter's work serves as a critical extension of certain arguments posited by James Paul Gee in his foundational book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003). But while Gee's text largely focuses on the educational and pedagogical potential of commercial video games, Johnson and Salter seek to simultaneously critique the legacy of corporate gamification while reimagining game-based learning in a gesture that questions the new pedagogical realities of the post-pandemic. In this manner, *Playful Pedagogy* specifically serves as an examination of the intensely corporatized, highly behaviourist gamification models of the many virtual learning platforms that proliferated during the pandemic and as an attempt to envision postsecondary classrooms in the context of playful learning.

In their introduction, Johnson and Salter touch upon the pandemic-related rise of communal video games like *Among Us* (Innersloth, 2018) and *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo EPD, 2020). The authors acknowledge that these titles are more than simply escapist outlets and recognize them as creative experiences that garnered significant acclaim. This is sharply contrasted against higher education's pandemic-driven pivot towards content-focused distance learning that sought to deliver educational materials as quickly and cost-effectively as possible. Such an intersection between these two disjointed forms of play during the pandemic is reflective of the dire need for an updated critical understanding of the pedagogical function of play. The authors ask:

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How can we recapture play at a time when play is more political than ever? Is play even the answer at a time when game companies are under increased scrutiny for discriminatory practices and toxic environments? And how can play be harnessed for learning as instructors across the world are facing budget cuts, burnout, and exhaustion in the face of a screen-based or “hybrid” institution? (pp. 4–5)

To answer these questions, the authors investigate the realities of virtual classrooms, the accelerated corporatization of education, and the use of gamification strategies in teaching and learning. Each of these factors gesture towards a single lamentable truth: Many of the digital learning tools championed during the pandemic function as surveillance tools designed for the explicit purpose of encouraging data-driven learning and data-driven engagement. The authors’ analysis appropriately scrutinizes the shift from in-person to online learning as a hasty solution to the emergency brought on by the pandemic. The gamified virtual classroom was adopted throughout many educational institutions and shrouded in marketing language that reinforced meritocratic virtual elements as playful educational innovations.

In Chapter 1, Johnson and Salter foreground their critique of pandemic-related gamification trends by specifically criticizing the methods through which corporations promote cultures of achievement, as though both games and education equally share behaviourist notions of reward and failure. The authors illustrate the fundamental differences between games and gamification by highlighting the central lack of meaningful play in gamified engagements:

The issue we have with most gamification attempts in education is the way that they seem to inject isolated elements from these rich, multifaceted digital worlds into existing rote tasks . . . truly engaging games are complete ecosystems of goals, challenges, puzzles, and—yes—rewards and punishments, but they all work together to create a player experience that is far more than the sum of its parts. (p. 30)

Despite the game-like point systems, badges, and rewards implemented into e-learning platforms, many of these digital tools simply reinforce “existing instructional frameworks in formal educational systems” (p. 36) and do not offer truly exceptional methods for challenging status quo educational models.

This critique is expanded upon in Chapter 2, in which the authors provide thoughtful criticism of various popular media forms of play. For example, whereas AAA games like *Portal 2* (Valve, 2011) and *Minecraft: Education Edition* (Mojang Studios, 2016) fall somewhat short of innovative approaches to curriculum development and delivery, narrative-driven roleplaying games provide space for potentially

transformative experiences. The authors cite simulation games like *Model UN* (Mahmood, 1922) and *Reacting to the Past* (Carnes, 1995) as user-friendly experiences that leverage critical and creative energies in forming “a playful future” (p. 58) that prioritizes teaching and learning as co-creative processes that strive towards self-expression and self-actualization.

Chapter 3 and 4 seek to identify pedagogically useful gaming experiences while condemning toxic gaming culture, as Johnson and Salter attempt to “reconcile the tensions between the imagined playful classroom and our lived experience” (p. 64). The authors use Ray Oldenburg’s (2013) concept of the “third place” as a guiding principle in their quest to restore public communities lost in the pandemic through virtual spaces. To this end, the authors point to the rise of games like the 5th edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Mearls & Crawford, 2014) played through virtual tabletop services like Roll20 as an example of how participants willingly enter into the “magic circle” of community-driven meaningful play. While such examples tease out some of the most inventive aspects of community-driven play, the shadow of GamerGate and the existential threat of the Metaverse still loom over popular notions of gaming culture. As such, many of the challenges surrounding community-driven moderation returns to issues that most gaming spheres are familiar with. Harassment, trolling, and misinformation all gesture towards the need for “educator-driven, feminist and anti-racist interventions” (p. 90), especially given the growing trends of post-secondary institutions utilizing Metaverse-like models for their teaching and learning.

In Chapter 5, Johnson and Salter contemplate the future of game-based learning. Utilizing Patrick Jagoda’s (2016) notions of “participatory aesthetics,” the authors point to the importance of collaborative narrative building and materiality as necessary elements in envisioning playful, co-creative educational models for the future. Jagoda’s campus lab at the University of Chicago is examined as an interdisciplinary space that allows game designers, students, and teachers to collaborate on game-related projects that explicitly reject behaviourist patterns in favour of pedagogically thoughtful engagements. Through these models, the process of teaching and learning foregoes rote memorization in favour of a pedagogical method that champions critical making. As the authors explain,

critical making involves research and understanding of a movement, theory, historical event, or other types of phenomena—typically rooted in society. The critical making researcher then creates something that emphasizes an aspect of this phenomenon to critique it. The actual product of the critical making then becomes a medium through which the author makes an assertion about culture or society, often a statement about the problematic nature of a practice or perspective. (p. 119)

Students and teachers who are engaged in processes of critical making point towards a future of co-creative play in which rigid structures are severed in favour of playful uncertainty and a more flexible curriculum that embraces empathetic pedagogical approaches.

Johnson and Salter's work successfully calls attention to the many flaws and failings surrounding the pandemic-driven attempts to gamify virtual learning environments and provides an opening for both students and teachers to reimagine game-based learning in a way that rejects the behaviourist, commodified structures of gamification encouraged by most commercial enterprises. That being said, *Playful Pedagogy* is much more effective as a methodological lens through which one may consider the development of pedagogy and curriculum rather than an archive of pedagogically useful games and activities. Regardless, in the wake of the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be remiss not to reassess the function and value of play in education, especially given the push towards the increasing digitization of our everyday lives. But as the authors proclaim, "teachers are not content providers [and] students are not receptacles for said content" (p. 138), and so, playful pedagogy must be understood as a pedagogy of empathy. In this manner, the authors successfully advocate for a future in which students are given creative outlets for their emotions and are encouraged to experiment and explore. The act of designing, creating, and playing pedagogy is thus a method to collectively imagine our futures together and to willingly engage in problem solving in a way that acknowledges the grief that we endured over the pandemic whilst striving towards more compassionate solutions.

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