

# Playing the Hidden Curriculum: Designing games to materialize and question the unwritten rules in higher education classrooms

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on several game design exercises in higher education classrooms, aimed at exposing the “hidden curriculum”: the unwritten social and cultural rules in education, in terms of behavioural expectations and practices, cultural values, power dynamics, and (civic) responsibility (Laiduc and Covarrubias 2022). Students conforming to this hidden curriculum more successfully partake in and move through the education system, while those who lack the cultural capital and familiarity with university norms like first generation students (Collier and Morgan 2008), working-class students (Yee 2016), and ethnic minority students (Smith 2015) find their opportunities limited or their roads to success thwarted. It is therefore imperative to expose these rules to offer equal opportunities for all students and steer clear of highly idiosyncratic and opaque processes of “socialization” (learning about - one’s relationship with - cultures, traditions and practices of the other) and “subjectification” (the development of a free and independent subject) (Biesta 2020).

This paper proposes low-key analogue game design exercises as a fruitful method for uncovering and questioning these implicit social rules, since trying to encapsulate a social situation in the language of games, formalizes and seemingly dogmatizes what the rules and goals are, who the players are, and what their skills and strategies are. This forces a reflection on what it means to “win” the “game” of education (Cole et al., 2020) and the strategic advantages that some may have over others (which in turn may force a changing of the game’s rules).

Specifically, this paper presentation draws on student and staff reflections and classroom ethnographies of a cohort of 170 first years BA students and 8 staff members to discuss 1) the value and challenges of discursive game design exercises (Glas et al. 2021) in the classroom, 2) the cooccurrence of and switching between play frames (Goffman 1974; Fine 2002[1983]) or spheres (Shousboe, 2013) in students and staff when laying bare implicit expectations and practices, and 3) the rule negotiation

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processes underlying the attempted redesign of a more inclusive and fairer classroom dynamic.

## **FROM GAMES TO MAKING GAMES AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE**

Since playing a game (by, or even against the rules) always requires an acknowledgement and understanding of its rules (Salen & Zimmerman 2004), framing or conceptualising a social situation as a game (or ecology of games, as Long already did in 1958) helps to understand that situation's governing rules and the practices within them. Following from this, the starting proposition of this project is that simulating the hidden curriculum in a game has the potential to materialize the implicit rules in the classroom, explain the current navigation of those rules by students and teacher, and devise strategies for fairer and more "successful" classroom practices.

However, since the hidden curriculum *is* situational (differing over time, in different places and contexts, and between different groups of learner and teacher personas) (Rossouw & Frick 2023) and *should be* negotiable and changeable (to intervene when it perpetuates inequality), our approach could not rely on merely playing a singular pre-designed game. Instead, it required the collaborative design (between students and teachers) of small situational, analogue (or sometimes just conceptual) games. In previous publications (Glas et al. 2021; Werning & van Vught 2021), we have referred to this as "discursive game design," a process of creating (and oftentimes re-creating and comparing) game vignettes to learn *through* the design process rather than *from* the finished product. Here, the language of game design (as well as the off-the-shelf prototyping material) functions as shared reference point or boundary object (Leigh Star 2010) that materializes thus far implicit social conventions, yet remains flexible enough to be tailored to more specific use or changed when needed.

## **THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM THROUGH SPHERES OF PLAY**

In designing and evaluating the classroom exercises we draw on work in anthropology (Hughes 2006[1983]) and developmental psychology (Piaget 1932) that discuss (playground) rule negotiation. Our departure point here is Buchholz's (2019) finding that materializing a set of flexible and thus far orally transmitted rules into a rule book leads to a contentious negotiation of those rules. For our game design exercises this meant that rules were drawn out of the realm of implicit social practice into the realm of prescriptive regulations (Winther-Lindqvist, 2009), thereby paradoxically forcing a reassessment of those rules now that they seemingly had become dogma and thereby non-negotiable. Furthermore, it meant that students were taken from what Schousboe (2013) calls 1) the "sphere of reality," (student/teacher identity with certain attributes, social status etc.), via 2) the "sphere of imagination" (game character identity with certain motivations, goals, etc.), into 3) the "sphere of staging" where the classroom situation is discussed and organized anew. Here, information on privileged/underprivileged positions and attainable/unattainable expectations and behaviours is filtered and redesigned through the game while still resonating with the actual classroom dynamics, leading to a more inclusive space for all students.

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