

The Texture of Play: Feeling Your Way Through Teaching with Games

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INTRODUCTION AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

As video games increasingly function as complex cultural and pedagogical infrastructures rather than simple teaching supplements (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2006; Pineda-Martínez et al. 2023), the humanities classroom is undergoing a parallel transformation. However, this shift is not occurring in a vacuum; it is unfolding against a backdrop of institutional precarity and a perceived "crisis" in the humanities. In the current neoliberal university climate, humanities educators are under increasing pressure to justify their disciplines through "innovation," digital fluency, and "employable" skill sets. While video games are known to foster skills such as communication, resourcefulness, and adaptability in learners (Barr 2018), there is far less understanding of how integrating games affects the educators themselves. The use of games in higher education is also shaped by the tension between experimental pedagogy and practical constraints, including restrictive platform licensing (Rivard et al. 2025) and the reality that learners may reject games as legitimate academic tools (Egenfeldt-Nielsen 2006). Since teaching is always grounded in emotion (James 2019), this project asks: what does it feel like to teach with games in the humanities, and in what ways do games reshape teachers' sense of authority, presence, and pedagogical responsibility?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper presents early findings from a Fulbright-funded qualitative project conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The methodological framework combines three complementary approaches designed to capture the "felt" experience of the instructor. First, I carried out semi-structured interviews with faculty, staff, and graduate instructors affiliated with the UNC Game Lab. These interviews were transcribed and coded using an inductive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of emotional tension and intellectual effort. Second, I engaged in one month of intensive teaching observations across several game-integrated modules. These focused on the "pedagogical choreography" of the instructor. I took detailed notes on how teachers moved through the physical space of the lab, how they managed technical "glitches" as pedagogical opportunities, and how they modulated their vocal tone and presence during high-stakes gameplay. Classroom

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observation provides access to real-time pedagogical dynamics (such as the management of collective frustration or the overall atmosphere of the room) that interviews alone cannot capture (Wragg 2011; Jones and Bergin 2019). Third, these methods were contextualized through my own practice as a temporary instructor at UNC Chapel Hill and a full-time lecturer at King's College London, allowing for an auto-ethnographic layer that bridges the gap between the observer and the observed.

FINDINGS: THE MULTIPLICITY OF TEACHER LABOUR

Drawing together these strands, the preliminary themes illustrate how teaching with games produces distinctive forms of emotional, relational, and intellectual labour. The first theme focuses on intellectual labour: Video Games as a Vehicle for Values. It highlights how instructors use games to communicate complex ethical or political ideas. Educators shared numerous anecdotes in which games prompted spontaneous, high-stakes reflections on race, normativity, or inequality. This immediacy was perceived as both demanding and generative, requiring the instructor to facilitate sensitive socio-political critiques in the moment without a prepared script.

The second theme characterises games as effective levelling tools that provide a common cultural denominator. This shifts the labour of engagement from a hierarchical "top-down" push to a collaborative "side-by-side" pull. Playing games in the classroom produced shared moments of confusion, laughter, failure, and discovery. Educators described these awkward or unexpected in-game events not as distractions, but as valuable catalysts for bonding. This relational work extends to colleagues within the Game Lab, who collaborate regularly to exchange strategies and troubleshoot the technical and emotional difficulties of "playful" teaching.

The third theme, Emotional Labour, concentrates on vulnerability and presence. Games can introduce unpredictable scenarios, such as collective failure or morally uncomfortable decisions, which challenge traditional forms of academic authority. Educators reported feeling more exposed and more present. Authority became a negotiated, relational practice rather than a strictly hierarchical one.

The fourth theme, "Content Preparation and Sensitive Matters", emphasises the hidden work of the game-based educator. Participants emphasized the need for exhaustive preparation of game content, particularly when dealing with sensitive themes. In a humanities landscape where "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings" are central discourses, the labour of vetting a 40-hour game for a 1-hour seminar is significant. Furthermore, using games challenges normative assumptions about what constitutes legitimate teaching material, requiring instructors to perform the additional labour of institutional advocacy to secure funding and lab space.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that game-based learning initiates a quiet revolution by deconstructing traditional classroom hierarchies. This tutor decentring aligns with the concept of "teaching as feeling" (Seyri & Ghiasvand 2025), where the introduction of joy and novelty into rigid structures fosters a newfound sense of instructor confidence. By embracing the tenets of ludic pedagogy (fun, positivity, play, and playfulness (Lauricella & Edmunds 2022)), the classroom becomes a 'safe-to-fail' site where the pursuit of "useless" in-game goals serves as a radical critique of productivity-focused educational models.

However, this transformation is more accurately a demanding evolution of pedagogical labour. The reality of 'playbour' introduces specific anxieties and invisible administrative burdens. Instructors must also navigate a struggle for institutional legitimacy, pushing back against normative university pillars that view gaming with suspicion or as merely subservient to technical skills.

Despite these hurdles and the time-cost of software, a profound sense of hope persists. While the institution may remain disinterested in the granular realities of implementation, the felt experience is one of rejuvenation. By decentring authority, games mitigate the painful feelings of forced engagement, replacing them with a natural, dialogic community. Ultimately, ludic pedagogy refreshes the relevance of the humanities, transforming the classroom into a more dynamic, and affectively rich environment.

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