

# READY OR NOT, HERE WE COME

## PLAY AS TOOL TO DISCOVER AND SHAPE NEW CONTEXTS

**Patricia Kovic [PLAYER A]**  
Associate Professor  
Otis College of Art and Design  
[pkovic@otis.edu](mailto:pkovic@otis.edu)

**Chris Chapin [PLAYER B]**  
Professor  
Kansas City Art Institute  
[cchapin@kcai.edu](mailto:cchapin@kcai.edu)

### A PLAYFUL PAPER ABOUT PLAY

This paper is a social game and experiment, a kind of Google Doc volley between two design educators, 1000 miles apart, teaching at two separate AICAD institutions, **[PLAYER A]** started the document. **[PLAYER B]** read **[PLAYER A]**'s initial writing and felt excited by what **[PLAYER A]** was writing about. So much thinking was sparked that **[PLAYER B]** decided to join in and become part of this paper/ conversation, offering new context and insight from time to time.

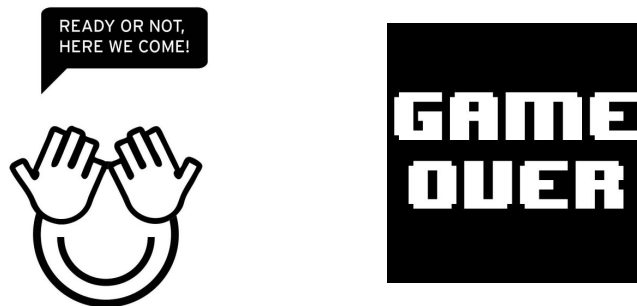


Figure 1. Nimbleness has become part of the new game rules for future makers and thinkers or “Game Over.”

### **[PLAYER A] PLAY AND THE FUTURE OF WORK**

Investigating the idea of PLAY seems timely and relevant in an age where work is being redefined and the definition of work is “in a state of PLAY.” Student designers flock to innovative design firms like IDEO that fosters playful, collaborative culture. Companies like Google have developed a culture that embeds PLAY in the work environment, equipped with scooters, tube slides, and indoor putting greens, as a strategy to shape community and increase social capital, especially the kind that drives innovation. According to a Google spokesman, Jordan Newman, the goal is “to create the happiest, most productive workplace in the world.” In fact, Ben Waber, author of “People Analytics, claims “the biggest driver of performance in complex industries like software is serendipitous interaction.”

Serendipity, while being one of the key components of play and innovation, can be the nemesis of traditional institutions, even colleges and universities that profess to prepare

students for an innovation driven future economy and world. Strategic planning, budgets and financial statement projections make “playing it loose and free” not much of an option. In “Revolutionary Wealth”, futurists Alvin and Heidi Toeffler explain this

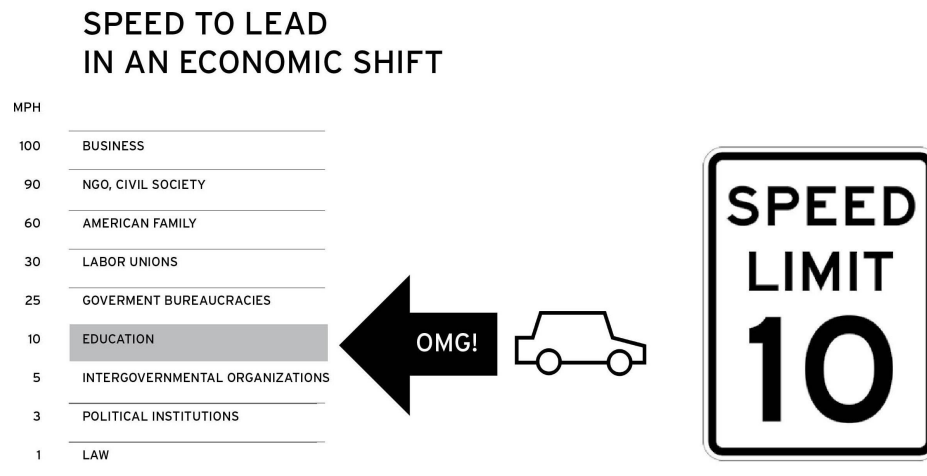


Figure 2. “What happens when one institution runs at such high speeds and leaves society’s other vital institutions miles behind?” Revolutionary Wealth, Alvin and Heidi Toeffler

conundrum by assigning car speeds to an array of businesses and institutions, as a metaphor for their ability to either drive change or keep up with it. Business leads the way, speeding along, on a joyride, at 100 miles per hour, while education lags behind it chugging and puttering at 10 miles per hour caught in a traffic jam of enrollment concerns, online learning, program reviews, student success teams and assessment vehicles.

There’s a serious game being played out, in our shifting economy and subsequent evolving culture. Whether we are student, instructor, administrator or designer, we find ourselves in the middle of it, with new game pieces, changing rules, poker faced opponents and unclear criterion for “winning.” The transition from an economy based on “heavy lifting” to one based on “heavy thinking” challenges us all, especially those of us who work in industry, or have start-ups and teach at the same time. Our “cars are de-synchronized, travelling at very different “speeds.” The Toeffler’s wonder “Can a ten-mile per hour education system prepare students for jobs in companies moving at a hundred miles per hour?” The “Roaring Nineties”, dot com buzzword “New Economy” isn’t that new anymore, and “Revolutionary Wealth” was published in 2006, but the stakes of “playing your best game” as an instructor are getting higher and higher. Demands are escalating in this economic paradigm shift and it’s beginning to be “Game Over” for those lacking responsiveness, nimbleness and humor.

## **[PLAYER A] EDUCATORS ARE PLAYSUCKERS!**

Prepare young designers the way you were prepared? Expect that they respond to education, with the same delivery system and relationship to instruction the way you did? Not an option. In the past month, I have asked fellow instructors with a wide range of ages, from a variety of institutions and disciplines “Is teaching in a traditional classroom environment and semester structure working?” The answers are the same. It’s breaking down, becoming less and less relevant and needs to be re-imagined.

On March 8, while several East Michigan University professors had been lecturing about “post-apocalyptic culture,” some of the 230 or so freshmen in the auditorium were having a separate, simultaneous conversation about them on a social media site called Yik Yak. There were dozens of posts, most demeaning, many using crude, sexually explicit language and imagery.” Are idle hands the devils playground? This sort of “horse play” is cruel and destructive, but one wonders if we should look at this from a different angle. Maybe education needs to be redesigned to include plenty of play, pranks, and student stakeholders, in the spirit of rigorous preparation for the next phase of the economy.

PLAY has the ability teach us to adjust to ever changing circumstances and strengthen our learning environment. It makes us better and better players, especially at difficult games. Solving complex problems by “MacGyvering”— thinking on the spot being resourceful with what is on hand, make us responsive and reflexive and increases our ability to pull together disparate bits of information into a new creative whole—an innovation cornerstone. Google interview questions like “How much should you charge to wash all the windows in Seattle” is less about the correct answer as it is about seeing how you PLAY with a problem—testing our hardiness, flexibility, wit and creative athleticism on the spot. “Ready or not, Here We Come,” is part of the new game rules for future makers and thinkers.

## **PLAY**

**Unexpected**

**Purposeless**

**Breaks Rules**

**Capricious**

**Mischievous**

**Enhances our Social Wit**

**Open-Ended Dialogue with  
Oneself and Community**

**[PLAYER B] RULE #1: STOP TEACHING. LEARN THROUGH PLAY.**

Stop giving student problems to solve. Instead give them tools to discover current contexts and shape new ones.

In the animal world, free play is one of two modes of learning. (role-modeling is the other) Free play (unstructured play) is the young animal's opportunity to explore, discover and negotiate the world as it is at that moment, in that place and set of circumstances.

Imagine a pair of adolescent bears. The mother bear is providing a safe place for her cubs to play—watching and protecting them from dangers—but allowing them to freely engage each other and their surroundings with curiosity and unfettered activity. They test their physical strength and acuity; they explore interrelationships; and they begin to explore their place in the world around them. The things they discover and learn may be quite different from mama bear may have learned several years earlier, and therefore they are learning more relevant lessons than if they had received instruction from mom.

Now substitute students for cubs and teacher for mama bear. The teacher creates a safe and fertile space, enabling students to play freely. In this classroom model, as with the bear family, the teacher does not teach as he or she was taught; in a context, in a very different world.

**[PLAYER B] RULE #2: ENABLE STUDENTS TO PLAY FREELY SO THAT THEY:**

- Adjust to continually changing contexts; environments, economies and sociopolitical structures
- Evaluate their own values
- Discover the ways in which they naturally relate to others
- Experiment with new ways to relate to others
- Discover and negotiate fears
- Negotiate conflict resolution

**[PLAYER A] NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE: DISRUPTIVE PLAYGROUND + MINI EDUCATION LAB**

NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE is a global community building initiative, aimed at linking core human motivations and cultural experiences with the goal of increasing worldwide happiness. Rapid cultural shifts create gaps in community. As our culture moves from muscle to mind, there are extraordinary growing pains. Many of us spend our time "putting out fires" and trying to keep up. GAPS in thought structure, context, behavior and interaction abound, often making us feel disenfranchised. It is as [PLAYER B] states "a very different world with very different context."

# NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE

Taught within the Creative Action program at Otis College, in Los Angeles California, which fosters team-based, interdisciplinary learning, NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE is designed to be a laboratory, and views a student's role as ethnographer. Using pedagogical tools for observation and inquiry, students actively investigate the customs, history, attitudes and peoples in their own backyard.

NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE "Neighbors" include: a third grade class at Loyola Village Elementary School (LoVE), The Westchester Senior Center, and The Custom Hotel—all located within 200 yards of one another. Though close in proximity, they have virtually nothing in common and no connection. Gaps in culture, ethnicity, age, socio-economic level, education and neighborhood investment abound. This random sampling of neighbors gives voice to an array of beliefs, concerns and attitudes. Students are challenged to apply microcosmic learning to a larger global context as a way to be better designers in an unpredictable future. NBG differs from other community engagement projects in that our core deliverable is insight into new contexts for social interaction, social environments, economies and sociopolitical structures.

A GAP or BRIDGE theme starts the process, not as a "problem", but as a context starter. It is usually based on the faculty teams random interest, just as a ball might be tossed in the air as an invitation to play. Throughout a project, the rules gradually change until there is a complete reversal of roles. Students become stakeholders and leaders and faculty become mentors.

## **[PLAYER B] RULE #3: THE RULES WILL CHANGE, and change again at any time during the game.**

We [institutions of learning] have to be more nimble. A new model of education is on the horizon—'ready or not'. We can either lead or follow. Most institutions, as slow adapters, will want to follow—not wanting to be the first to make a bold change. But to attempt to follow, in this case, is to be left behind, not able to keep up and stay relevant. Therefore, leading is the only real strategy.

An institution that attempts and professes to teach risk-taking, rule breaking and innovative exploration, must be prepared to take risks, rewrite the rules and engage in institutional innovation that is free of the 'PlaySuckers' Player A writes about.

**[PLAYER A] CASE STUDY (IN PROGRESS): RE-PROGRAMMING A NEIGHBORHOOD FOR PLAY**

Our sleepy Westchester, California community is undergoing significant changes. Its history seems to closely mirror the overarching three economy ages: Agrarian, Industrial and Knowledge, offering a unique perspective on past, present and future economies. Westchester began in the nineteen hundreds, as an agricultural hub for dry land farming—beans in particular, according to residents at the Westchester Senior Center. The rapid development of the aerospace industry followed in 1932 with Boeing Industries a major player. In 1928, Loyola University moved to the area, followed by Otis College in 1964, who still resides in the former IBM building. This began a shift toward Westchester becoming a “higher-level education corridor.” This spring, Otis College is undergoing a campus expansion, including the addition of dormitories, producing a shift from a commuter school to a residential one. A renovated Ralphs supermarket complete with Starbucks, has emerged and even the 1970’s building that houses the Westchester Senior Center, across the street from Otis is being renovated by the Westchester Rotary Club. But the event that seems most significant is arrival of a new Knowledge Economy “Neighbor” — Google. “The tech titan has spent nearly \$120 million on 12 vacant acres next to a historic hangar where aviator Howard Hughes built his famous “Spruce Goose” airplane,” in the Playa Vista neighborhood near Westchester.”

**ECONOMIC WAVES**

Westchester/Playa Del Mar, California

AGRARIAN	INDUSTRIAL	KNOWLEDGE
DRY FARMING	AEROSPACE INDUSTRY	CREATIVE ECONOMY
HOG FARMS	BOEING INDUSTRIES	OTIS COLLEGE
	LAX	LOYOLA MARYMOUNT
		GOOGLE
		YAHOO



Figure 3. Westchester California offers a unique perspective on past, present and future economies.

**[PLAYER A] PLAY BEGINS TO SHAPE CONTEXT IN A NEW TYPE OF CLASSROOM**

In Spring 2015, the NEIGHBOR-GAP-BRIDGE class began with a suggestion to work with the design team renovating the Westchester Senior Center. Our team developed the course focus to include into a broader examination of the gentrification in our campus, neighborhood and the public park across the street. Introducing the lens of PLAY into this investigation was a hunch, on the part of the class. A nimble course structure allowed us to revise the class structure, on the spot, adjusting our NEIGHBORGAPBRIDGE Training Games, Rapid Research, Paradigm Pantry, Site Visits and Community Partners to meet new course direction.

It is mid semester, as this paper is written and PLAY, in the form of course experience has begun to shape the class context and direction. Readings selected from the “Paradigm Pantry” have added structure and context. Three NEIGHBORGAPBRIDGE Training Games exercises have taken place in our public park across the street.

Student teams have formed and eight “PLAY” intervention projects are being developed. This paper, as well as the eight student outcomes will be the basis of a publication released in May of this year as well as a pop-up exhibition in the newly renovated senior center.

## PLAY SHAPES CONTEXT



Random Faculty Curiosity	Global Evolutional Trends	Students Needs + Assets Survey	NGB Training Games	Un-Planned Opportunities / Events / Accidents	Paradigm Pantry Reading	Research Discovery	Neighborhood Experience
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### [PLAYER B] RULE #4: CHANGE THE LANGUAGE

Problem solving = Changing Contexts

Instructor = Enabler

Lesson Planner = Provocateur

### [PLAYER A] MORE OF A PAUSE THAN A CONCLUSION

The semester continues after the submission of this paper, so the conclusion of this piece is perhaps more of a pause. Small moves in a small class can put change in motion. There is significant engagement in the class. They are making it up as they go along, more comfortable with “not knowing.” There is a good level of risk taking and some new thought in the air. As [PLAYER B] says in RULE # 4, students are becoming more context changers. They move about our neighborhood and workspace freely with purpose. There is a lot of laughing and provoking dialogue. PLAY and the feelings that

result from it — exhilaration, release, joy and connection to others, seem to have been embodied and this group is literally a joy to be around.

For play occur, outcome needs to be undetermined, much like this Google Doc volley between two design educators going on in this paper. The precise fact that we don't know what will happen, adds to the suspense, excitement and thrill. It also adds to the risk, resulting in discomfort and imbalance. A shifting economy, driven by innovation, offers a unique opportunity to reexamine PLAY as a powerful tool. PLAY is good for us. It enhances our social wit and creates an open-ended dialogue with our evolving selves, communities and world.

### **[PLAYER B] RULE #5: IT'S OK IF THERE IS NO END**

The best and most educational play is unconcerned with conclusion. The more productive goals advance play and its positive lessons. Often, the real goal is simply to keep the game going.

Years ago, I received a promotional piece from a paper company. It was a puzzle made of twenty 4" squares, each printed with complex graphics on both sides. The instructions were vague, but indicated that the squares were to be linked to make a larger picture. At first, it was easy—the visual links were obvious. I then realized that in some cases, both sides worked in one part of the picture or another, evolving the construction into a more complex set of decisions. But this puzzle became even more complex. Once I had laid all of the pieces down, the picture was still not complete, and I discovered that the piece needed on one side was already in position on the opposite side. After moving piece after piece from one side of the picture to another, I realized that the object of this puzzle was not to complete the picture but to continue the play—indefinitely.

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