

Play as a Method: Positionality, Power, Possibility

Dale Leorke¹ 

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Abstract

The institutionalisation of play is well documented, but less attention has been paid to what happens when play becomes not only an object of study, but a way of doing research. This article explores the methodological and ethical complexities that arise when play is used as a research method within academia, where it becomes entangled with the personal, institutional, and political dynamics of scholarly life. Blending theoretical reflection, autoethnography, and a grounded ‘case in point’, I examine how play – as both practice and analytic – is shaped by power, discipline, and researcher positionality. Rather than offering best practices, I foreground the risks, failures, and ambiguities that make research with and around play difficult, but also transformative. I argue that staying with these tensions can unsettle academic norms and open more accountable, situated, and imaginative ways of doing research.

Keywords

entanglement, failure, friction, intervention, polyvocality, reorientation, repair

Introduction

Play has become a site of persistent tension within contemporary scholarship: simultaneously celebrated as creative and disruptive, yet continually subject to domestication and control. Game studies scholars have long examined how play is alternately harnessed and marginalised: sometimes embraced as a force for innovation and social transformation (Frissen et al., 2015); at other times framed as something to be managed or made productive (Flanagan, 2009). But these tensions extend well beyond game studies, shaping how play is understood and mobilised across multiple academic and institutional contexts. More than a leisure activity or childhood pastime, play is increasingly recognised as a mode of experimentation, improvisation, and engagement. Scholars and practitioners alike turn to play to unlock creativity, foster resilience, and generate new ways of knowing (Henricks, 2020). But as its uses multiply, so too do debates over what play is, what it does, and whose interests it ultimately serves (Flanagan, 2009; Nagel, 2002; Trammell, 2023a, 2023b).

Today, play is not only an object of study, but something many researchers use as a way of doing research itself: a method to facilitate inquiry, participation, and creative engagement (Karppi & Sotamaa, 2012; Lammes, 2007; van Vught & Glas, 2018). While much has been written about using ‘play as method’, less attention has been given to what happens when play enters the practice of research itself. Using play in research ties it to the same pressures and

expectations that shape university life, raising difficult questions about value, power, and accountability. What does it mean to research *through* play in institutions that measure creativity and reward performance?

This article takes up that question, examining how play operates when folded into the structures, pressures, and expectations of scholarly life. Drawing studies of games, play, and culture into direct dialogue with one another – as Trammell (2023) also urges – I argue that scholars must acknowledge play’s capacity to disempower as much as empower, and inflict pain as well as provide pleasure, within their own work. Building on calls for more ‘situated’ and ‘reflexive’ approaches to play research (Baird & Harrer, 2021; Lammes, 2007; Markham, 2023), I weave together theoretical discussion, autoethnography, and a grounded ‘case in point’ – a series of collaborative workshops I was involved with where these tensions and dynamics came to the fore.

My aim isn’t to prescribe best practices or to resolve contradictions. Instead, I want to foreground the tensions,

¹Centre for the Sciences of Place and Memory, The University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

Corresponding Author:

Dale Leorke, Centre for the Sciences of Place and Memory, The University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, UK.

Email: dleorke@gmail.com

ambiguities, and generative troubles that emerge when scholars engage play from within the academy (Sydnor & Fagen, 2012). By tracing both the possibilities and the limits of play as method, I call for research practices that remain alert to scholars' own investments, complicities, and responsibilities – and that turn this awareness into openings for new forms of inquiry, reflection, and transformation. Attending to these complexities can make research more accountable, situated, and imaginative, while inviting both personal and collective reckoning with the conditions of scholarly life.

Positionality

Studying games and play means asking not only what play is or does, but how and why it matters to researchers – and how their own methods, questions, and perspectives are bound up with play's shifting boundaries and uses. This calls for both an inward and an outward turn: not just acknowledging, but foregrounding, the positionalities, privileges, and exclusions that shape engagement with play. I argue that such attention is *a necessary first step* in using play as a method within scholarly research.

While declarations of positionality are now commonplace in reflexive research, scholars have noted that such statements can risk reducing the complexities of identity, experience, and relation to fixed or oppositional categories (Davies & Harré, 1990; Lather, 2007). Here, I approach positionality not as a static declaration but as an ongoing practice of reflexivity – a way of tracing how identity, relation, and voice are continually made and remade in connection with others. This involves recognising both the limits of one's own perspective, and the potential for polyvocality: a framing that's attentive to multiple voices, shifting identifications, and the complex ways people are positioned by, and alongside, others (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bakhtin, 1981; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; hooks, 1989; Minh-ha, 1989). Polyvocality treats identity not as a settled position, but as an unfinished process of becoming – shaped through encounters with others, institutions, and the shifting terrain of research itself. Reflexivity isn't a 'tick in the box' (Ahmed, 2012: 118); it's a dynamic and sometimes uneasy practice of attending to the many voices and positions that shape research and its relations with others and ourselves.

With this *theoretical* positionality in place, I now begin by tracing how experiences of misalignment, identity, and belonging first brought games and play into focus for me. Through a brief, but deeply personal, foray into the specific textures of childhood, family, and place that characterised my early life, I examine play more broadly as a force for unsettling norms, disrupting paradigms, and reorienting one's sense of self and possibility.

Disorientation

I grew up in a small, conservative town – population around 8,000 – in rural Australia, over 400 km from the nearest

capital city. From my earliest memories, I sensed that I was *out of place*, or perhaps more precisely, out of step. I couldn't name this dissonance, but I experienced it as a constant undertone – an ongoing misalignment, unnameable but always present, woven into the social structures that defined my world from its beginnings.

At first, this dissonance expressed itself in my immediate familial environment. My father is a plumber – a 'tradie' in Australian lexicon, a term that refers to tradesmen, whose work is hands-on and practical, often involving construction, repair, or maintenance. This term also usually conjures up an image of 'blokey', rugged, coarse-spoken men in high-vis jackets and work-stained jeans. In every conceivable way, I did not fit this image. I was quiet, introverted, impossibly skinny, averse to noise and performance. My orientation was elsewhere – towards stories, language, the imaginary – not towards the material, mechanical, and bodily competencies that my environment seemed to value in a male-presenting child.

I didn't yet have the language to articulate this, but I knew that I didn't conform to the gendered and heteronormative expectations that surrounded me. Accompanying my father to job sites as a child was a form of torture to me. This wasn't just because my physical and intellectual sensibilities were fundamentally mismatched to his type of work, but also because this labour came with an unspoken script I couldn't convincingly perform. It required a comportment, a way of moving and speaking, that felt not only unnatural, but impossible, to emulate.

My awkwardness with wielding shovels or wrenches, my inability to match blokey banter, my visible disinterest in the world of pipes and fittings – these all made clear that my failure was more than just physical; it was *ontological*. Inhabiting this environment produced feelings not just of boredom, exhaustion, and frustration, but also a much deeper affective residue of inadequacy and shame. As Sara Ahmed (2006: 57; original emphasis) writes, 'the work of repetition is not neutral work; it *orients the body in some ways rather than others*.' This repetition – of tasks, gestures, and feelings – oriented me away from who I was.

School only intensified this estrangement. My thin frame, quiet manner, and withdrawn disposition marked me as different, but not in any immediately nameable way. Like many queer rural youth, I became a target of ridicule both for my visible, physical self and my invisible – though apparently discernible – sexual orientation. This bullying was both casual and constant, reinforced by my continual incapacity to perform the kinds of masculine posturing or heterosexual interest expected of me. I distinctly remember once, in a high school classroom when the teacher was absent, a boy, addressing me, lifted his shirt to reveal his abdomen and chest and said to the room, 'This is what a man should look like'. In that moment, I wasn't just different – I was singled out, made an example of, becoming a reference point for others to orient themselves against. A *disorientation*, in the most literal sense.

This disorientation extended beyond family and school, and into the social fabric of the town itself. My hometown is statistically one of the most ethnically diverse localities in Australia, yet it bears a deep undercurrent of racism, xenophobia, and settler-colonial anxiety. Historical records show it was a centre for Aboriginal displacement and forced assimilation (Healy, 2020). Public figures – including a long-respected local doctor, memorialised fondly to this day – used their position to warn that Aboriginal presence would spread ‘disease’ and ‘ghettos’ throughout the town, framing racial diversity as a threat to social cohesion (Panagopoulos, 2021: 140-1). Meanwhile, the region itself – one of Australia’s largest producers of table grapes, citrus, and almonds – outwardly projects an image of rural multiculturalism through the presence of Southern European, Pacific Islander, and Southeast Asian migrant workers. But this image is based almost entirely on economic utility and cultural segregation, not genuine inclusion (see Missingham et al., 2006).

As someone who is white, my experience was not shaped by direct racial exclusion, but by the wider dynamics of difference, sorting, and pressure to conform permeating this environment. For someone already misaligned with norms of masculinity and heterosexual conformity, this environment produced not just discomfort but a pervasive, structural sense of unbelonging. It is a place shaped by repetition and silence – disciplining those who don’t move, speak, or desire in the ways it expects. This subtle encoding governs gender and sexuality, but also race, class, and ability – determining which lives are deemed legible within its frames, and which are marked as ‘deviant’ or out of place.

Growing up, it was clear to me that there was no tangible outside to this structure. My school, friends, family, and the town itself formed a tightly enclosed circuit where difference had no outlet for expression. In this environment, *play* emerged not simply as escape, but as something more elemental: a way of *being otherwise*. It offered glimpses into alternative ontologies where orientation, action, and even identity could follow divergent paths. As a child, I found this refuge in fantasy books, shows, and films: *The Magic Faraway Tree* and *NeverEnding Story* series, *Goosebumps*, *Round the Twist* and the absurdist fables of Paul Jennings. Each opened portals into worlds whose rules operated differently from those of my own. I can still recall, as a young child, spending countless hours on our backyard swing set, spinning new stories for these characters and worlds in my head. The rhythm of swinging seemed to propel my imagination outward – a kind of ‘vertigo’, or play of the mind, that blurred the boundaries between movement, daydreaming, and invention (Caillois & Barash, 2001/1961). Later, as a teenager, this impulse found a more immersive outlet in console videogames – especially atmospheric adventure games like *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Jet Force Gemini*, *Eternal Darkness*, and *Metroid Prime*, with sprawling, layered environments rich with affect, choice, ambiguity, and queer undertones, however subdued or latent (see Ruberg, 2019).

These forms of play – embodied and cognitive, analogue and digital – were more than distractions or entertainment. They offered something my immediate world did not: a means of inhabiting space differently, of exploring identity and relationality without the rigid scripts that structured my everyday life. In them I could experiment with action and attachment, failure and consequence, in ways that felt both safe and expansive. They weren’t necessarily a rejection of reality, but a kind of rehearsal for another one, allowing me to move in the gaps between memory, desire, absence, and possibility (see Nicoll, 2021). In retrospect, this wasn’t an abandonment of my world, but a reorientation – a way of *living sideways* to the structures that insisted on conformity and segregation.

Reorientation

If disorientation defined the structure of my early life, play offered a way to inhabit ambiguity – not to resolve it, but to stay with its tensions, contradictions, and unfinished possibilities. In the gaps of everyday life, play was less an escape or refusal than a practice of living with uncertainty: making do, rehearsing alternatives, and improvising within constraint. What mattered was not play’s opposition to reality, but its capacity to generate new orientations in the face of ambivalence and precarity.

In this article, I treat play not as a single, unified category but as a set of overlapping gestures and orientations. Drawing loosely on the rhetorics of Sutton-Smith, 2001/1997 and the forms of Caillois & Barash, 2001/1961, I understand play as encompassing acts of mimicry and imagination, vertigo and risk, and forms of rule-following and rule-breaking. These are not fixed types but shifting dispositions that enable play to manifest differently across contexts: as creative, resistant, or complicit – and sometimes all at once.

Here, I find resonance with the work of Mechtild Nagel (2002), who argues that play’s power lies precisely in its marginality. Nagel, writing from a feminist and post-structuralist lens, notes that in western philosophy play has long been dismissed as unserious, childish, irrational – branded ‘the Other of philosophical discourse’ (2002: 4). This exclusion is not incidental, but deliberate: play is cast out precisely because it resists the dominant norms of rationality and ordering upon which philosophy – as a historically white, patriarchal, heteronormative institution – has staked its authority. In this framing, play becomes a site of anxiety: something simultaneously alluring and abject, compelling and repulsive – always on the periphery of thought, but never fully admitted into it. As Nagel shows, however, this marginality is a site of potential as well as exclusion: play’s very ambiguity can be a force for unsettling what counts as legitimate, reasonable, or serious.

At the same time, romanticising this force also risks flattening play’s complexity. Drawing on Trammell’s (2023b)

work, we must acknowledge that play is a source not just of pleasure or resistance, but also of harm, capture, and subjugation – particularly for those whose experiences are erased or marginalised by ‘the White European definition of play that solely sees it as productive of pleasure’ (Trammell, 2023b: 85). As Trammell notes, by focussing exclusively on the pleasurable, voluntary, or civilising aspects of play, scholarship on play has overlooked the pain, coercion, and violence that can also characterise playful acts – especially for BIPOC and LGBTIQ+ people. If canonical theories celebrated play as the crucible of ‘civilisation’ (see Huizinga, 1949/1938), this celebration frames civilisation itself as white, European, and able-bodied – defining itself against, while excluding the voices of, those labelled ‘deviant’, ‘savage’, or other.

Crucially, Trammell’s approach does not simply invert the binary or cast play as irredeemably harmful or corrupted. Instead, it insists on play’s entanglement with both pleasure and pain, agency and coercion, world-making and world-destroying. His concept of ‘reparative play’ acknowledges the wounds, failures, and violences that haunt playful practices, while refusing the lure of purity, perfection, or nostalgia. As he writes, acts of ‘repair’ reveal ‘how the most painful dynamics of play often exist alongside its most pleasurable aspects’ – drawing on imperfection, ambivalence, and even brutality as means to process, survive, and rework painful histories (2023b: 87). This isn’t a promise of healing, but a commitment to staying with ‘the messiness of life, seeking a philosophical praxis that is down, around, outside, and always just out of reach’ (2023b: 3).

For those living at odds with dominant scripts – of gender, sexuality, race, class, ability – play’s critical and reparative force often lies not in transcending pain or captivity, but in navigating, processing, and sometimes even reworking it. As scholars like Ruberg (2025); Simpson (2017) argue, play becomes a method for ‘making do’ in hostile worlds, a way of testing attachments, rehearsing alternatives, and finding new footholds in the cracks of everyday life. Other feminist, decolonial, and intersectional voices across game and play studies also remind us that play isn’t always gentle, consensual, and pleasurable, but that its ambiguous, shifting quality can still support acts of survival, refusal, and re-orientation (see e.g. Chess, 2017, 2020; Grace, 2021; Gray, 2020, 2025; Harrer et al., 2023; Mukherjee, 2017, 2022, 2025). To play, from this lens, is to move through and with ambiguity, to encounter both pain and pleasure, capture and resistance, and to remain alert to both the reparative and destructive work that play can do – sometimes at the same time.

Power

If play’s generative power lies in its capacity to unsettle and reimagine the given, this very potential simultaneously renders it attractive to forces seeking to domesticate or deploy

it for their own ends. In other words, what makes play so powerful – its ambiguity, its promise of renewal, its tendency to slip beyond fixed meanings or predictable outcomes – also makes it a target for co-optation. As play circulates through institutions, policies, and professional discourses, its disruptiveness is no longer seen as a threat to be managed, but a resource to be harnessed. As Trammell (2023b) shows, this instrumentalisation isn’t just a contemporary phenomenon, but part of a longer history where play’s capacity to both enchant and discipline others has been exploited by those in power.

In what follows, I call for a reflexive and critical approach to using play as a method in scholarly research – one attuned to how easily play can be appropriated or co-opted by institutional systems, including academia itself. Working with play methodologically requires vigilance: an awareness of how institutions and researchers alike can be drawn, knowingly or not, into entanglements that shape not only how play is enacted, but whose interests and priorities it ultimately serves.

Capture

Far from being dismissed as unserious and irrational, play is now widely embraced across education, design, public health, and the creative industries as a tool for engagement, innovation, and behavioural change. When I Google the phrase ‘play as a method’, I’m met with a cascade of enthusiastic results: organisational websites, blogs, instructional videos, popular science articles, and peer-reviewed papers all extolling the benefits of play. These sources range in tone and depth, but all share a common conviction: that play is *good for us*. It ‘unlocks creativity’, ‘fosters engagement’, and helps ‘build resilience’.

The ‘Play Way Method’, for example, promotes teaching children through hands-on activities, exploration, and games that nurture playfulness, creativity, and curiosity. Design consultancies spruik playful methods as a way to ‘spark innovation’ within organisations, while gamification theorists claim that introducing rewards, badges, and points can make even routine tasks more ‘meaningful’ or ‘fun’. Across these domains, play is credited with a host of benefits: enhancing problem-solving, cognitive flexibility, empathy, collaboration, and trust; reducing stress and building resilience; boosting confidence through experimentation; and encouraging physical movement and active lifestyles. Often, these claims are accompanied by charts and statistics to help bolster their credibility (see e.g. LEGO Group, 2018; Play England, 2023; Swanson, n.d.).

In all these examples, play is *instrumentalised*. It becomes a kind of panacea – an antidote for almost any societal, economic, or environmental problem. In this framing, play is no longer generative, ambiguous, or unruly, but a strategic resource deployed in service of clearly defined ends. Whether the goal is learning, team cohesion, public health, or

innovation, play becomes a means to an end. Its unruliness is tamed, its ambiguity flattened, and its capacity to challenge normative structures stripped away. In the process, its complexities and contradictions are smoothed over, erasing the histories of harm, trauma, and exclusion experienced by those for whom play has not always been safe or pleasurable, but sometimes imposed, coerced, or fraught (Fickle, 2019; Trammell, 2023b).

This presents a paradox. Even as play undergoes something of a renaissance in institutional, governmental, and corporate discourses, it is simultaneously absorbed into systems it once unsettled. Rather than its former ‘malediction’ within philosophy, play is now surrounded by a kind of institutional ‘benediction’ (Nagel, 2002: 60) – albeit one that comes with an obligation to prove its value in terms legible to systems of productivity and measure. Play must deliver returns: better cognition, enhanced wellbeing, team performance, innovative thinking. It becomes palatable, disciplined, managerial – something that fits neatly into grant applications, program evaluations, urban design masterplans, and HR strategies.

Intervention

These questions are not just theoretical. They confront me in practice, frequently surfacing in the projects that I study and collaborate on. My work centres on ‘playful interventions’: games, participatory artworks, and creative practices like outdoor installations, apps, or interfaces intended to prompt reflection, spark dialogue, or reshape or reclaim public space. Sometimes I study these interventions as an observer. Other times I’m involved as a collaborator or ‘embedded researcher’, documenting their design and impact on participants through interviews and surveys. In both roles, I’m attentive to how play is structured, by whom, and to what ends. The projects I study often emerge from genuine impulses: to open dialogue, provoke reflection, foster social connection. Yet, as Trammell (2023b: 34) cautions, even ‘well-meaning and altruistically minded’ interventions grounded in care and justice can unwittingly reproduce exclusion or reinforce dominant frameworks, especially if they don’t attend to the histories of harm that play might carry for some participants.

Mary Flanagan (2009: 11), quoting the *Oxford English Dictionary*, notes that interventions ‘are specific types of subversions that rely upon direct action and engage with political or social issues’ – defined as ‘a “stepping in,” or interfering in any affair, so as to affect its course or issue’. It’s tempting to assume that art, games, or creative interventions are automatically radical or transformative. In practice, though, their politics are shaped by the structures and assumptions that guide participation. What is intended as an open invitation can, without care, become an imposition – one that claims public space or community attention, but fails to grapple with the complexities, histories, or lived

experiences present within them. Too often, playful and artistic interventions risk overlooking local knowledge or reproducing existing patterns of exclusion – becoming what Flanagan (2009: 206) terms ‘an entertainment spectacle for an advantaged audience’: seemingly participatory, yet leaving deeper structures untouched. Andrew Zitcer (2018) similarly critiques how top-down frameworks like creative place-making can instrumentalise creative practices, aligning them with institutional agendas while reshaping or erasing local knowledge.

The projects that I’ve studied often navigate these ambivalences – seeking inclusion and empowerment while contending with assumptions about who belongs, who benefits, and what counts as ‘valid’ participation in the eyes of funders. In this sense, interventions become sites of ‘ethical friction’ (Sieck, 2023): continually negotiating the balance between intent and impact, and between transformation and attentiveness to inequality.

Entanglement

These tensions are not unique to playful interventions. They extend deep into the world of academia – where, if anything, their stakes and risks are amplified. In academia, play is not simply a method of research, but one shaped and sometimes weaponised by the institutional logics that authorise knowledge and distribute legitimacy.

This dynamic is most visible in the language of academic research – especially in fields that describe themselves as ethnographic or participatory, yet rely on terminology that is clinical, detached, extractive, and at times exploitative or even predatory. To ‘capture’ or ‘document’ people’s experiences, to ‘map’ communities, to ‘gather’ data from ‘research subjects’: such phrases have become so embedded in scholarly discourse that their *violence* is easy to miss. I’ve used them myself – in publications, presentations, and grant proposals – sometimes unthinkingly. Yet I’m aware that each time they enact a small dispossession. These phrases frame relationships as resources, experiences as extractable content, and the researcher as translator, arbiter, and owner of the research process and its outcomes.

These are not just words. They are techniques of control – legitimising a research ethics that distances even as it demands intimacy, and enables knowledge production by subordinating those from whom knowledge is drawn. Bringing play into academic research risks reproducing and amplifying these same logics: diluting play’s unruliness, appropriating its critical force, and redirecting it into circuits of productivity, evaluation, and display. The seductive promise that play can ‘engage’, ‘prototype’, or ‘co-design’ futures too often overlooks the institutional pressures and constraints that shape these activities and make them possible in the first place.

In the contemporary university – crippled by decades of defunding and neoliberal metrics of evaluation and

performance, now under sustained assault by fascist governments – even play is made to perform. What makes play alluring to institutions, governments, and businesses – its capacity to be rendered legible to metrics and outcomes – makes it equally appealing to academia. It is seized upon as a flexible, ‘low-cost, high-yield’ tool: agile, interdisciplinary, attractive to funders. It promises disruption while remaining translatable to systems that demand outcomes. Its vulnerability to capture allows it to be easily folded into frameworks of productivity and impact – valued only to the extent that it generates measurable outputs or novel interventions.

Play, in the most pessimistic reading, becomes a form of soft capture: a technique for producing engagement, affect, and labour that can be returned to the university as evidence of vitality, relevance, and impact – or remoulded or discarded when it no longer aligns with funding agendas. As the climate surrounding universities grows ever darker (Fleming, 2021), these pressures only intensify for scholars working methodologically with games and play.

These entanglements extend beyond the institutional or disciplinary and into the personal. My ability to play – intellectually, methodologically, professionally – is a privilege that few are afforded. I am given time, resources, and legitimacy that many others are not. As a white, bigender but male-presenting queer scholar from rural, yet relatively affluent, origins, I navigate corridors closed to many of my non-white, Indigenous, gender non-conforming, and otherwise excluded peers. However innovative, creative, or ‘critical’ my work may appear, it is still validated through institutional structures of reward and recognition. The space I have to think, experiment, challenge, or critique is not outside the system, but entangled in it. Again, in the most pessimistic reading, my research might itself be considered a form of self-indulgent ‘play’, enabled by the luxury and affordances of my position, and by structures of calculation and capture that count it as productive labour.

I’m conscious of the risk of retreating into self-indulgence in this reckoning. But refusing these tensions, or seeking their resolution, would betray the ethos of play itself: its ambiguity, its contradiction, and its refusal of closure. Instead, I offer these reflections not as an excuse, but an invitation: for scholars working with games and play to remain attentive to the entanglements of power, privilege, and institutional violence that shape their relationship to play in their own research. It’s only by acknowledging and inhabiting these contradictions that we can begin to imagine forms of research, and of play, that don’t just reproduce harm, but open new space for critique, accountability, and care.

Play as a method, in this sense, is not only a question of technique but of stance. Alongside other modes of reflexivity, it is a mode of inquiry that *tests, unsettles, and reconfigures* relations between researcher, participant, and institution. It can mean playing by the rules – engaging systems on their own terms – or playing against them, bending or even breaking them to reveal their limits (Apperley & Dieter, 2010;

Consalvo, 2007). In this sense, play as a method foregrounds the researcher’s capacity for tactical engagement: for testing boundaries, experimenting with relation, and learning by working within contradiction.

Case in Point: Grounds for Play

In what follows, I turn to a project I was involved in as one way to unpack these tensions. This case in point – I avoid calling it a ‘case study’, to resist reducing it to a set of findings and outcomes – does not resolve these contradictions. Instead, it foregrounds them, showing how the entanglements discussed above take shape in practice. As with any institutional project involving play, it is vital to resist the temptation to romanticise either play or community engagement as inherently reparative. The same frameworks designed to foster inclusion and creativity can also reproduce exclusion and harm, including to those who facilitate them – reminding us that play is never simply safe, consensual, or benign (Baird & Harer, 2021; Trammell, 2023b). What follows, then, is not a story of ‘best practice’, but a candid account of the messiness and ambiguity that arise when playful methods meet institutional constraints.

Promise

Recently, I was involved in a pilot project at a large Australian university with a diverse group of academic and community partners, which I’m anonymising here as *Grounds for Play*.¹ *Grounds for Play* set out to explore how marginalised young people – specifically queer and Indigenous youth – navigate and reimagine urban public spaces through creative, playful means. The initiative was supported by government funds aimed at piloting new approaches to health and wellbeing for young people through art, culture, and play.

The original plan was to repurpose an existing modular public space: essentially a portable outdoor installation that had previously hosted playful public art interventions across various neighbourhoods. The team would co-design new activities and content for this structure with young people from the specified communities, inviting them to shape not just its use, but its meaning and relevance. The idea was to have local community organisations ‘host’ the installation on or near their grounds, fostering trust and ownership.

However, it soon became clear that these community organisations were wary of the structure’s visibility itself. They voiced concern that outdoor public play could expose participants to risk or unwanted attention from hate groups. By the time I joined the project team, the activities had shifted towards more private, process-oriented workshops – held in or around safe, familiar community venues, with invitations shared through existing networks. This shift was not a retreat, but an acknowledgement of the ambivalence and risk that play can carry for marginalised groups – risks shaped by a long history of exposure, surveillance, and institutional

failure to protect (Gray, 2020; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2011; Trammell, 2023b).

The workshops were planned in a series: morning and afternoon sessions across two weekends, blending walks on Country led by Indigenous knowledge holders with creative sessions led by queer community facilitators. Activities ranged from collective mapping and storytelling to hands-on design tasks using materials such as building blocks, dioramas, and craft supplies. The intention was for participants to imagine and prototype spaces where they might feel safer, more visible, or more connected to their identities and histories in public.

The first scheduled sessions attracted registrations – but, in the end, no one attended. Several factors contributed to this, including exceptionally cold and wet weather. But more significantly, there had been little time to build trust with communities who have good reason to be cautious about institutional research. In response, the project team condensed the next round of workshops into a single, more flexible session, co-facilitated by an Indigenous Elder and a queer community leader. Held in a repurposed arts venue, the event combined a walk around the precinct with a creative building session and informal discussion.

Participation was small and mostly comprised of individuals already connected to organisers: acquaintances, colleagues, and family members.² Nevertheless, the workshop proved unexpectedly rich. Participants crafted models representing personal refuges, speculative environments, and allegorical urban scenes. For example, one participant (Asian, male, gay, 20s) built a resting place in memory of a beloved pet; another (Asian, male, queer, 20s) constructed a futuristic control centre with cloaking abilities, reflecting a desire for autonomy in public space. Teenaged brothers of mixed Māori and Asian descent, meanwhile, drew on pop culture references and the experience of walking on Country to assemble miniature narratives that echoed themes of colonialism, power, and hidden treasures beneath the surface of everyday life.

A striking moment came when a small-scale replica of the original outdoor installation, assembled by one of the facilitators, accidentally broke on its way to join the group's collective neighbourhood of models. Once reassembled and placed among the others, its angular, geometric form sat awkwardly beside the more open-ended, improvised constructions participants had crafted. This image felt like a metaphor for the project itself. The original plan – a public intervention for queer and Indigenous representation – was misaligned with community needs from the start. Pressed for time, we recruited from our own networks rather than building more reciprocal collaborations. Turnout was low, even by the modest standards of pilot projects. The concept was flawed from the beginning, and this finally became clear when it literally fell apart in our hands and refused to fit among our participants' creations.

Despite these challenges, the session poignantly revealed how playful methods can surface complex stories and aspirations, showing how young people navigate, resist, and reimagine the constraints of urban space. Even within a small and familiar group, the models and narratives that emerged clearly demonstrated how play can evoke forms of expression and reflection rarely reached through more conventional research methods.

Failure

This project was my first time working explicitly with queer communities in my research, and, having grown up feeling 'out of place', it held deep personal and professional significance for me. Some time after this pilot phase, a new funding round was announced, offering resources to continue or expand existing work – closely aligning with our aims.

I approached this new opportunity with mixed feelings. On one hand, it represented a chance to address the shortcomings of the pilot: to work with community organisations from the very beginning, spending time getting to know them, attending their meetings and events, and having both their staff and members involved as co-designers of future workshops. On the other hand, I was acutely aware of the systemic pressures we had already encountered – particularly the tension between prototyping new ideas and the demand for 'measurable outcomes'. I wanted to approach things differently – not just methodologically, but in spirit.

I made two things explicit up front to the project leader. First, while the pilot had shown promise, it fell short of its promised impact, and I knew that even the modest funds we were awarded would have made a big difference to community organisations that support vulnerable and marginalised groups. Public health resources, I stated, should not be squandered, even with the best of intentions. Second, I agreed to co-write the new grant application as long as the project design incorporated time and flexibility for relationship-building with community partners. This approach recognised that building trust and collaboration with them would require *investment* of a different – more sustained and reciprocal – kind.

As we drafted the new grant application, I found myself caught between conflicting impulses. I wanted our language to reflect a genuine commitment to collaboration rather than extraction, and to ensure community involvement was substantive, not merely procedural. Yet the process itself felt shaped by the very structures I was questioning – flawed not in its design, but in the system that produced it: an entanglement of institutions, actors, and imperatives that perpetuate scarcity, self-interest, and extraction. I found it difficult to shake the sense that, however well intentioned, our efforts seemed destined to be drawn back into familiar institutional logics.

When the funding was awarded, my fears were realised in the worst way. Decision-making by the project leader quickly

veered away from the collaborative ethos we had imagined. Old, familiar hierarchies reasserted themselves. A key contributor – precariously employed and deeply invested in the project – was deliberately and maliciously excluded. In the aftermath, a close, long-standing professional relationship ended painfully, and I withdrew from the project on ethical grounds. Aware of my own complicity in these institutional logics, I was left with a lingering sense of irresolution – a tension between what had first drawn me to this work in the first place, and the realities of how such projects unfold within the university.

This experience was, in many ways, a failure – of intentions, outcomes, and relationships, but also of my own belief that entrenched structures could be changed from within. Yet, as Jack Halberstam (2011: 88) reminds us, failure is not an end but a way of beginning again – a refusal ‘to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline’, and a clearing from which to imagine alternatives. Rather than closing a path, this rupture revealed the fault lines in my own thinking and forced me to confront the futility of repeating familiar patterns. In that sense, failure became a space of potential – a moment to reconsider what else might be possible, and to begin seeking new ways of working, collaborating, and imagining play as a method.

Possibility

What follows failure is rarely clean, orderly, or planned. Sometimes all that’s possible is to take stock – to acknowledge what has broken down, and to notice what questions or openings now come into view. In drawing the threads of this article together – the intersections of play, method, positionality, and institutional constraint – I want to resist neat resolutions or prescriptive advice. Instead, I return to method not as a fixed formula, but as an open, situated practice: one attuned to uncertainty, partiality, and the shifting conditions traced throughout this piece. What follows are not conclusions but methodological waypoints – for myself, and for others navigating their own entanglements. A quiet map of survival and resistance, for moving through the forest differently, through glades of ambiguity, play, and refusal.

Positionality as Method

Approaching play as a method shouldn’t begin with abstract frameworks or ready-made techniques, but with a reflexive turn: a reckoning with the conditions, histories, and attachments that shape our own orientations to play. Method, in this sense, is less a toolkit for knowing the world than an ongoing practice of locating ourselves and others within it – recognising how our investments, privileges, and exclusions shape what play can do for and with us. Attending to positionality in this way isn’t an act of self-absorption, but a form of *relational* and *responsive* reflexivity: one that recognises the unfinished, shifting nature of identity, voice, and belonging.

Reflexivity isn’t about declaring a fixed position, but about staying attuned to the multiple, intersecting relations that continually shape both research and play as they move across personal and institutional boundaries.

In many ways, my own history of disorientation and self-preservation has followed me into academic life. The sense of being slightly off-centre, never quite fitting the available scripts, has shaped how I approach research and collaboration. Although my work draws on participatory and community-based methods, I’ve tended to occupy ambiguous, liminal positions: both participant and observer, player and documenter. I bring ideas, but don’t impose them. I’m involved, but always from the edges – attentive to the shifting interplay of voices and relations that shape any project. In earlier writing, I acknowledged my positionality only partially, maintaining what I saw then as a necessary ‘critical distance’. It’s only through my recent experience with the *Grounds for Play* project, and through the more personal and experimental writing of this article, that I’ve begun to more fully reckon with how my own history and practice are woven into the research I do.

Yet I’m also aware that ongoing reflexivity – slowing down, attending to entanglements – carries its own risks, and can itself be a form of privilege. Within contemporary academic life, such hesitation or self-questioning can easily be read as inertia or even self-sabotage. This is especially true in institutions where productivity remains the primary engine of value, and where little room is left to pause or take stock. The challenge is to hold space for reflection without becoming paralysed by it – to recognise both the necessity and the inevitable limits of reflexivity within the real conditions of academic work.

Edge as Stance

Academia is structured by boundaries – disciplinary, methodological, institutional – that promise order, but often constrain what counts as legitimate knowledge or valuable inquiry. The persistent pressure to prove value or legitimacy is not unique to studies of games and play (see Shaw, 2010); it haunts all research that unsettles disciplinary orthodoxy. For those who work at the edges – by choice, circumstance, or necessity – marginality is more than a position of lack or exclusion. It can be a methodological and ethical stance: a way of moving through the university sideways, navigating its demands without being fully absorbed by them. In my own work, the edge is not only a metaphor but a material reality – always present in how projects are funded, whose voices are amplified, and whose labour remains unseen. Working at the edge means accepting instability, improvising within limits, and finding small, sustainable ways to keep curiosity and care alive amid systems that value certainty and speed. It’s a daily act of persistence; one that carries costs – exposure, vulnerability, precarity – but can also hold space for other ways of thinking, creating, and belonging to emerge.

For those engaging play, experimentation, or creative practice as method, the task is not to romanticise the edge as a refuge or site of freedom, but to recognise how it exposes the contradictions of academic life – the continual negotiation between creativity, care, and performance. Play heightens these tensions precisely because it operates through contradiction: between rule and improvisation, structure and freedom, seriousness and frivolity. This doubleness makes play distinct from other reflexive or participatory methods. It renders visible the contradictions of academic labour itself, where creativity and compliance often co-exist. In this sense, play is particularly well-suited to revealing the academic systems that shape it through its capacity to perform the very paradoxes it attempts to critique.

Failure as Outcome

To work with play methodologically is to remain open to its unruliness – to processes and outcomes that resist closure. Failure, in this sense, is not simply a negative result but a sign that something has escaped capture or eluded easy translation. As Annette Markham (2023: 53) notes, reflecting on failure can ‘reveal rich possibilities and new potentialities’ for inquiry. For me, the collapse of a collaborative project was not just disappointing. It also exposed the limits of intention, the force of institutional logics, and the importance of staying with what cannot be resolved. These are not the kinds of ‘outcomes’ that grant applications or institutional frameworks typically value, but they are the ones that often matter the most. This realisation aligns with Sydnor and Fagen’s (2012) argument that play can serve as a ‘plotless’ paradigm for research: resisting tidy narrative closure, embracing ambiguity, and unsettling the expectation that inquiry must always yield coherent findings or outcomes.

Yet this approach requires a deliberate, attentive stance: seeing play not as something to ‘master’, but as an ongoing practice of reorientation that makes space for pause, reflection, and failure (Lammes, 2007). In this, I find resonance with Flanagan’s concept of ‘critical play’: the idea that openness, ambiguity, and resistance are not by-products of play, but qualities that must be deliberately structured into its design. Rather than closing down meaning through fixed objectives, Flanagan calls for prototyping with difference in mind: crafting the conditions through which new relations and interpretations can emerge. Failure, discomfort, and friction are not flaws in the design process, but signs of its integrity. As she observes, projects and interventions produced in this spirit not only ‘disrupt the existing social realities’ around them – they can also ‘*disrupt the design process itself*’ (Flanagan, 2009: 256; emphasis added).

Rupture as Opening

The rupture that ended my own project was difficult, but it also clarified for me the stakes of working with play in

institutional contexts. Methods are never neutral tools. They are sites of negotiation, friction, and transformation. Rupture exposes these dynamics, forcing a reckoning with how we collaborate, what we value, and what we are willing to let go. For me, this has meant treating failure as a generative site – asking what becomes possible when we resist the impulse to domesticate play’s unruliness and remain open to the possibility of starting over again. Here, we might imagine a new kind of contingent, imperfect collaboration: ‘collaboration’ not just with other people, but with method itself – its uncertainties, contingencies, and our shifting, often uneasy relations with it. Rather than seeking to contain play, we might instead remain open to what emerges when we allow play to disrupt *us* in return.

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ORCID iD

Dale Leorke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8741-1758>

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the administering university’s Human Research Ethics Committee. All interview participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Consent to Participate

All participants provided informed, written consent for their contributions to be used in research and publication. Identifying details have been anonymised for this article.

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Notes

1. I have altered the project title and certain details, roles, and methods used to preserve my collaborators’ anonymity.
2. All participants provided informed, written consent for their contributions to be used in research and publication. Identifying details have been anonymised for this article.

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Author Biography

Dale Leorke (they/he) is a Research Fellow in the Centre for the Sciences of Place and Memory at the University of Stirling, Scotland. Their research explores the intersections and entanglements between play, place, and institutional life through ethnographic methods. They are the author of five books, among them *Location-based Gaming* (2018), *Public Libraries in the Smart City* (2018) and *The Library as Playground* (2022). For more info, visit <https://www.dleorke.net/>