Transcript

[0:01] (music)

Derek Bruff: [0:05] This is Leading Lines. I'm Derek Bruff. Back in 2019, the Center for Teaching, along with a few other units on campus hosted a Learning at Play symposium about teaching with games and simulations. Listeners may recall that Mark Sample from Davidson College was our keynote speaker. And I talked with him here on episode 72 of the podcast. Given the COVID pandemic, we didn't host another Learning at Play Symposium in 2020. But I did hear from some Vanderbilt instructors about their efforts to adapt games and simulations to the teaching conditions of the pandemic.

[0:41] I was really impressed with their creativity in doing so. In fact, they weren't just adapting, but they were using technology to enhance these activities to foster deeper learning. In lieu of another Learning at Play symposium last fall, I organized a panel on Zoom with some instructors, Teaching with Games and Simulations in the Pandemic. And I'm happy to share the audio from that panel here on the podcast today.

[1:04] Our panelists were Holly Tucker, Mellon Foundation chair in the humanities and director of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. Shaul Kelner, associate professor of sociology and Jewish studies. And Cait Kirby, PhD candidate in biological sciences. In the audio that follows, you'll hear all three panelists talk about the games or simulations they taught with or created in 2020. And you'll hear them respond to a couple of questions from the audience.

[1:34] You'll hear a couple of abbreviations along the way that aren't defined. So I thought I would define them for you now. One is OCDI. That refers to the Center for Teaching's Online Course Design Institute that we've talked about here on the podcast in the past. And another is RPW, which refers to the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities that Holly Tucker directs. Now here's the audio from our November 2020 panel on Teaching with Games and

Simulations in a Pandemic. (music)

Holly Tucker: [2:06] Thanks, Derek. Hi everybody. So I am teaching this semester, a course, RPW, Robert Penn Warren, 3333W, Rethinking Pandemics from a Cultural History from Antiquity to Now. This is not a course I've taught before, although I have taught as someone who works in the history of medicine, I have taught the history of pandemics, but I've certainly never taught about the history of pandemics while my students and I and the rest of the world are experiencing pandemics.

[2:39] The beginning of the course, it was all online, mostly asynchronous online. Thanks to the OCDI, this summer, the amazing work of the Center for Teaching. I modeled a lot of what I've been doing on their great advice, even using the same icons for the activities. And what I found is students were very engaged, but I was missing that spontaneous synchronous aspect. For the most part, I have to be off campus because of family concerns, so I couldn't teach in-person.

[3:22] In the past, I've done a couple of games through a consortium out of Barnard, called Reacting to the Past, and it's largely consortium of faculty members in history who have put together very strictly curated role-playing games. I have done the Rousseau, Burke and the Revolution. So I've done the French Revolution. I've also done the, there is a game on Galileo. There are a variety of levels.

[3:58] And traditionally, typically these games are a lot of fun in which students take, they have detailed role sheets. Typically they're part of a faction. And each of the role sheets are very different because the characters are different and it gives, each character has their own personal objectives depending on what their specific role is. So in the case of Louis the 16th in the French Revolution game, you might imagine that his main objective is to stay alive, right? And to figure out ways to do that.

[4:34] As well, there are, each character has to give a speech and also has to write a paper. What I've done in the hall and in the halls and classrooms of Furman Hall. I've done this in person. And it's always once the students, once the students warm up to it, it gets really heated. So in the French Revolution game, the crowds led by some crowd leaders were trying to get their voices heard in the newly formed National Assembly. Just like Dungeons and Dragons, depending on what types of strength points or other things that they've put together, they can have a greater chance through a die roll.

[5:17] So one of the ways of enhancing the die roll was to be able to do a petition and I had students present from the crowds present, this was a year and a half ago or so, present a petition signed by 200 Vanderbilt students (laughs) to let the crowds, a voice be heard. And in the Galileo game, they needed to do some sort of creative project that would voice their position on Galilean's theories. And I had students singing "me, Galileo, Galileo." And they actually took the lyrics of the Queen song and performed it.

[6:03] Unfortunately, it was very early in the game and they hadn't paid really attention to what they were saying. So the church faction took the lyrics of their rewritten game and then some of them were excommunicated from the church because they just weren't paying attention to the primary documents. So what I really, I'd heard about a game in development. It's in level 2 development. It was called Death Comes to Norwich 1349.

[6:29] And this game was, is so very interesting because the conceit of the game was that the plague is coming to the town of Norwich, in the second wave of the bubonic plague. And the city leaders need to decide whether they will on three points, it's what they call a flashpoint game. So it's done over four class periods where the Galileo and the French Revolution game is done over 12 to 13 periods. They needed to make a decision about whether they would shut the city gates. And the second one was a plague was understood to be caused by bad air miasma. Inside the city, there were all different types of tradesman doing work with the butchers, the towel makers, what they were going to be doing with the trades, would they be taken out of the city?

[7:22] And then on top of it, flagellants. So the whipping of oneself, which was a fringe of the medieval church, to be able to ask for God's forgiveness for sins and be able to lift the plague. And the Catholic church was not in favor of that because it seemed like an extremist group. The other question is, will the city allow there to be a flagellant procession? Now, what's interesting here is that to make a decision to get rid of the tradesmen, they also have the trades faction, right, clearly doesn't want that to happen. So they are doing everything to break broker deals and to create alliances so that the vote will go their way.

[8:06] So let me just give you a sense of what I did, is I did it, a mix of asynchronous through Slack and then synchronous through Zoom. And we met three or four times. We met an initial organization, organizational game. And then we met three times synchronously. So the Parish and this is the Slack setup. So we have the Parish Records. And as we, people die. So there's a Grim Reaper Lottery. Then as well, we have to keep track of who dies and

who doesn't. So this gives you an idea of this would be the second vote. This was eventually proposed, negotiated in small rooms. So this is what they proposed. And then you can see that each person votes.

[8:48] They also have what's called Personal Influence points. The Personal Influence Points enhances your vote. And at different moments during the game, just to unsettle things and also to make it realistic because the plague, once you had the bubonic plague, you only had three days to live, generally. It was quite painful to die. So we had all different, the game would change much more rapidly. We had some students played up to three to four different roles because they would be, they'd be dead. Or in this case, this was a barber, a barber surgeon who was excommunicated.

[9:33] It was really interesting as well because students went well above and beyond my expectations. Typically, the speeches are done live in class. Instead, I had them do their speeches just to keep our time efficient. And then also when we, this is one I particularly like. I like them all because they all inhabited their roles. This is our mayor of Norwich, and he also was the bailiff, a bailiff and the tavern keeper. After the first vote, there was a mix-up. It was actually my fault. There was a mix up where he had voted twice. Some of the other players had caught that the mayor had voted twice. And here he is quite contrite. And I love, several of my students actually adopted dialects, some more effective than others.

Audio Clip of Student's Speech: [10:25] All right, there's much to be said, and little time to say it. So I'll do my best to cover all the bases before we go to meet. First things first, I must apologize for what looked to be my own discretion at our last meeting. I swear on a stack of Bibles I did not intend to vote twice, and I apologize for that record keeping error that made it look as though I did. I want you to know that I will do everything I can to earn your trust as mayor. Over the head, from that, I must give my thanks to the bishop for my own discretion through my vote into question. And the bishop's kindness in keeping the vote in our favor. Our town must protect itself as best we can in the days to come. And the bishop has moved us in the right direction in doing so.

Holly: [11:17] Now the bishop toward the end started to understand that the church had a lot more power than she understood. And so she was very, the bishop and the other priests were looking for compromises. And then they realized that they didn't necessarily have to make those compromises in the Middle Ages. Two more things I'd like to show you is they had to write papers. And I had done a little bit, just a quick module about early modern in

medieval broadsides, which were, they would've been plastered on the city walls, done in manuscript at first and then after the printing press, of course, in rudimentary print.

[12:02] So I'd given them some examples, actually it was anachronistic, some examples of sixteenth-century broadsides. Students had to write their papers and there were certain, in their role sheet, there were certain primary texts. All the students read all of the primary texts, but they had to specifically be engaging them as often as possible. This I was very pleased. This was the very first one out of the gate. And so the, this is from a goldsmith, Master Darby.

[12:31] "And so our gates must remain open to assist each and every guild. The doctors of Paris advance to their skill, identify the plague at its source and assert that the cause is not ours, it is celestial, of course. These masters of medicine also assert the plague is born of the soil and that pockets of air, pockets of air seep out with control and cause our people despoil."

[12:56] This student is specifically engaging humoral theory from the Middle Ages and then also looking at miasma theory. Again, what happened since this was the first one out of the gate, then all of the rest of the students then wrote inverse, all of their broad sides inverse, and then they debated those and discussed them together.

[13:18] To wrap up, what I'll show you is each in Slack, each of the factions had their own discussion area where they could plot and scheme. And I found that this was really great. In fact, it's going to change the way I do these games in person going forward. Because unlike in-person, students have to sort of slip each other notes or give each other a wink or something like that. They can actually be on Zoom either as a group or in small groups and be signaling to one another. So it was really fun as the game master and they had to speak to me, "Good evening, Game Master Tucker." And they all spoke to me in character. This was really great is to be on the Zoom calls.

[14:11] And then my Slack was going bing, bing, bing, bing, bing, bing all the time. Then there were other things. Red flower was each, each of, well, it turns out there were flagellants in the group, in all of the factions. And so they had to be able, since it's a secret religious group, they had to be able to identify themselves. And so in the game materials, students would mention the word "red flower" as a way to find one another. And so I created, after they started to find each other, I would find, I created a new space for them to talk.

[14:44] And then we also had family tree because in the Middle Ages, it was considered that plague could come from bad air. It could come from the stars, come from God. It could also be the work of magic. And I didn't have enough roles and so I needed to supplement the game. So I began writing more roles of women. There weren't enough women in the game in my opinion. And so we found, I found some herbalists, women who were working in herbal medicine, who also did some abortions and also were dabbling in witchcraft and we had a full-on witch trial toward the end.

[15:25] And they, and they all had to, at one point, make a vote for which protective device they were going to be using, a protective they'd be using, would they make a donation to the church, would they use a talisman or would they give to the poor. No, it wasn't give to the poor. It was something to bring the traits faction and I can't remember. So the game is really, you play it off the cuff. You played off the cuff, but it's really well structured. And I didn't think that I'd be able to do this at all asynchronously. And it ended up working like a gem.

[16:02] I'm glad that I can do it again next spring, but I'm going to move it out of Norwich because the game's still in development. So that gave me tons of freedom. We're going to move out of Norwich and move it into an area that I'm more familiar with, which is the black death in 1665, London and that way I can do a lot more about sort of city design and things like that. So anyway, I went a little bit long there, Derek, but I'm done.

Derek: [16:25] All right, thank you, Holly. I will say though, having sat in on a couple of your Reacting to the Past simulations in the before times when we were in the same room. I was very excited to hear how you would adapt it to the online environment. And I can see how some things, like the extra tool set has just kind of opened up the door for more options. So that's very exciting. Shaul, I'll ask you to share next and tell us about the simulation that you used this fall.

Shaul: [16:52] So I did a simulation in person that I've done before in previous classes. But because I was teaching in person and some of the students would end up in quarantine figuring out how to adapt an in-person simulation for COVID protocols and quarantining was, that was the main challenge I had with this. So I was teaching, I am teaching a class this semester. So it's a first-year writing seminar entitled The Cold War Struggle to Free Soviet Jews. And there's a unit where we are looking at how activists in this global movement, but really we're looking at activists in the States, how they engaged children and got kids involved in activism.

[17:40] So part of what they did was they created simulations that they played in summer camps and in Hebrew schools. And these things are pretty common. If you went to a Jewish summer camp in the seventies and eighties, there's a good chance you would've played a game like this called Exodus, the Russian Jewry Simulation Game. And the point of the game was to play that students by and large are playing the roles of Soviet Jews who wanted to emigrate from the country, but were forbidden to emigrate. And if they filed an official request to leave, then they would get fired from their jobs. They might lose their apartments. They faced all different types of forms of government harassment.

[18:22] And the simulation is to essentially run the bureaucratic gauntlet, apply for the visa and get the run around there, gets sent to the KGB, have to get a security clearance, but you don't have funds. So they'll send you to the bank and each of these office, each of the bureaucratic offices is obstructing and ascending the people running back and forth. So when I, when I teach this in a normal situation, it's a pretty small defined area and there's a lot of hustle and bustle and moving back and forth. So that clearly is not is not an option in this type of a situation.

[18:58] Now, usually what I will do is I'll have some of the students will play the would-be emigrants, and other students will play the hostile bureaucrats. I'll join in as a hostile bureaucrat, and I'll take long tea breaks, chai breaks to make the students wait in line. But here the question was how if some of the students are present and some of the students are not, how do we, how do we balance that? Let's say that the goal for the students who are playing the would-be emigrant is to get a visa. And the way that this simulation game is set up, maybe about 10 percent of the students will actually be able to succeed and get out, so to speak.

[19:41] So my learning goals for this, were both directly, I wanted students actually to learn about what were the challenges that Soviet Jews faced when they were trying to emigrate. But I had a meta goal and we were doing the simulation to think about and learn about the simulation itself. To look at how the plight of Soviet Jews was taught to American Jewish youth. And so we did a simulation and then we reflected on how might kids who had participated in this learn and what does that mean? It erases all types of interesting issues about using fun to study oppression and things that we don't think go together. But we looked at how this movement brought the two together.

[20:25] Okay, so we spread the simulate. To actually do this, we spread the simulation stations

outside. We used the dining tents to maintain physical distancing. It was something that was really would not have been possible to do inside. Unfortunately, we had a, we had a physical plan that actually made this, that made this possible. And you can see the, you'll see here are students at a station. Here's a station. There's a station somewhere over here and there's some back there. And we'll zoom in a little bit and I'll show you what's going on.

[21:04] So in some instances we had the station workers who were present in person. And the station worker stayed in place. This was the banker. And these, these would be emigrants who were trying to get funds that they would need to pay for the emigration visa. Other station workers were not present. And so here you'll see, this is a student who's at the KGB office and you can't see the face, but the KGB officer is a student who was in quarantine here. This is another student waiting in line to go next. And that required planning pretty much day before and morning of because it wasn't clear to me if the students are going to be coming back or not and I didn't know exactly who was going to be in and who would be out.

[21:51] So it's a first-year writing seminar. There are 15 students. It was easy to maintain the communication to find out who would actually be physically present, who was going to be coming in remotely. And what I did is I allocated the roles based on whether people would be in person or not. The emigrants have to move from station to station. And the stations are fixed in place. And so I decided that anyone who was remote is going to be a station worker. And I assign those roles in advance and gave them all the preparation materials that they had. And so all the conversation was carried out through the, through laptops, through iPads and the like.

[22:30] Fortunately, I was able myself to scrounge together enough laptops and iPads that for the number of students who were remote. But if there were more students who were coming in remotely, then I would have had a tech shortage, might have needed to call on the students to help with their own laptops or something like that. But there were tech considerations that we had to think about. And here you'll see this student who was on the screen is playing someone from the Soviet Jewish community who's trying to actually help the emigrants to navigate the bureaucracy.

[23:09] It's a formal simulation curriculum published in 1974. And it had a lot of forms to fill out and a lot of paperwork. And one of the things that we could not do was exchange paper. So at the bank, instead, they normally, they would give this In Stalin We Trust, trustee Stalin banknote, and then they would walk it over to the visa officer. We couldn't do that

anymore. So what I had students do to adapt for that was that students who had to fill out forms would fill out their own forms. But there would be no exchange, any exchange would be done through photograph, showing photographs on the on the screen. And if there was anything, if they needed to get a form signed, for example, and then take that signed form to another office, they would take a picture of, they would take a selfie with themselves and the station worker giving a thumbs up, and that would count.

[24:06] And so that's how we did that. But it required some thinking in advance of all the ways in which the simulation as originally structured, would not be protocol compliant. And then thinking about ways to adapt for that. So I'll wrap up on that, but I just want to say that's what we did a number of other games and simulations in the class. And I'll just quickly go through these, although I'm not going to detail too much. We use some of the COVID protocols to our advantage. So it was really common in this, in the movement to free Soviet Jews, which is going on from the sixties to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s as a way of symbolizing the absence of Jews were not being allowed to leave, synagogues around the world would reserve an empty seat on the pulpit. Sometimes they would mark the seat with the name of a refuseniks who they had adopted.

[25:03] And when we were learning about how, still in the unit on mobilizing youth. When we were looking at how activists engaged bar and bat mitzvah boys and girls by matching them up with Soviet Jewish twins. And so it would be, for example, I'm 13 years old. I'm a rising to the pulpit to recite my prayers for my bar mitzvah. It's not only me, Shaul Kelner, who is coming up here. I'm going to say these prayers on behalf of my Soviet twin, Leonid Bourass. Let me tell you about Leonid and his family, his father is a journalist, he was fired from his work for writing things that the government didn't like. Then they lost their apartment. They're trying to emigrate. Leonid cannot have a bar mitzvah because he's not allowed to in the Soviet Union.

[25:55] So there were lists and lists of all the Soviet Jewish quote unquote twins that were given out to 12 and 13-year-olds across the US, thousands of them in the 1980s. The 15 students each got bar and bat mitzvah twins. They learned a bit about the twin. They delivered their bar and bat mitzvah speech, including thanking the rabbi and saying, "and to my little brother, even though he annoys me, I still love you." They were, authentic. But one of the things that we also did is we used the distancing protocols to bring the absent twins present, to make them present. And that was something the movement did a lot of, making the absent present.

[26:35] And so you can see, you can see one name here, but if you look back, you'll see others anywhere that the students were sitting on the banner next to them that we're using for keeping the seats apart for social distancing. They flip them over. I gave them erasable markers and they wrote the name of their twin. And so the twins are physically present in the room with us to evoke the empty chairs that you would see in the synagogues.

[27:03] We also did simulations and games that were entirely online. And again, a lot of this was reprising things that were done by activists in the movement. 1980 Moscow Olympics, activists in Britain had a poster contest for school kids across Europe competing for freedom. And the students did this. They did this at home, posted on Brightspace. And then we voted. And you can see our bronze, silver, and gold medalists.

[27:35] Ok takeaways. First, yes, we can. I'm thinking specifically about the in-person nature of this. The assumption that doing active learning in a socially distance classroom is impossible. That is a self-fulfilling prophecy and we shouldn't assume it. We can do a lot more than we think we can if we give ourselves permission to try. Among the things that came up as I was trying to plan, the emigration simulation were issues around the need for technology, how we manage mobility in a simulation that requires people to move around. How we, what type of space we can use, how we allocate roles when not everyone is going to be physically present, but how can we allocate roles in a way so that everyone can participate in a meaningful way.

[28:28] University infrastructure was crucial for this. If we did not have those tents, I don't know how I would have done this. And so the outdoor learning space really made the emigration simulation possible. And also it really is even it's possible, but it's inherently precarious. The outdoor learning is vulnerable to weather. We did this in a beautiful day at the beginning of October. Had this been a rainy January day, it would've been a different thing. I hear that we're getting heated tents, which is fantastic. We're going to need the heat in tents if we want to do stuff outside. I think that even January, February when the weather gets cold, we will still be able to do this type of stuff. We just need to really be creative and use the systems that we now have in place that are keeping us, that are making it possible for us to be in-person and safe at the same time. So I will end with that. Thank you.

Derek: [29:25] Thank you, Shaul. And again, I'm impressed at the creativity you brought adapting the simulation to the current situation. And just the thoughtful connections outside of the one simulation, the thoughtful connections that you drew between making the absent

present and how that played out for the experience of Soviet Jews, but also kind of how we're, we're having to navigate that right now as well. That's, it's just really impressive. Cait, you're next. Cait's experience is a little bit different. It wasn't tied to a particular course. But she was doing some really interesting things with simulations this year as well, Cait, would you mind sharing?

Cait Kirby: [30:09] Yeah. Thank you very much for having me and I loved hearing these other examples of making all of this work in this really seemingly impossible situation, but making it work. And so my story of the simulation or a game that I use actually starts at Learning at Play last year. When we were at Learning at Play last year, I would say maybe like 50 percent of the presentations mentioned this thing called Twine. And so I left that session and I spent probably a whole week just trying to figure out how to use Twine and being really overwhelmed. Because I wanted to do like a really big thing. I wanted to like write some sort of interactive textbook online or something. I was like this is cool, I will do it and I overwhelmed myself. And so I just sort of dropped it.

[31:05] But Twine I will share my screen is this online, open-source way that you can make like nonlinear games, sort of like choose your own adventure activities. And so I just sort of went online and I tried it and as I mentioned, I got really overwhelmed. And so I dropped it and then I got tapped to teach the STEM specialization for the Center for Teaching over the summer. And on Monday in our first session a participant, mentioned that they assume that we could probably use video games in the classroom, but they don't know how. And I was supposed to teach video games. Sorry, I was supposed to teach using technology later on in the week, it was only a one-week course.

[32:03] And so Monday I decided I'm going to figure out how to make a Twine and make it and share it with them later on this week. And so I think part of that shows you how easy Twine actually is that I could just sort of pick it up and try it. And so I didn't really know what I could quickly put together to show this group of grad students and postdocs how to use Twine. But earlier, this was the second week in June and so we'd been in the pandemic for a while. We were trying to figure out what was going to happen in the fall. And there had been these big pieces online about what COVID might look like in the fall, if we have to do all these social distanced activities, how would we have students in the classroom and have them actually be able to learn?

[33:03] And they were all coming from this very typical student perspective that there was no

perspective from students who have disabilities or chronic illnesses, or that there were no perspectives that we're taking into account the fact that we're going through a racial upheaval like a reckoning in the US. And at that point in time, there had just been some governmental legislation that would make it harder for trans individuals to get health care in the US. And so again, there were a lot of these think pieces about what the experience was going to be like for students if things were on campus, but thinking only about sort of the typical student.

[33:52] And so I thought, okay, why don't I try to use a storytelling, a narrative empathy building way to really evoke the terror that a lot of students are going to feel if they have to go back to campus in the fall. And so I can just sort of show you quickly, this is what the game or the story looks like. I'll drop the link in the chat. I can show you how easy it is to just make things in Twine. You just like add a passage and then you write things and then you link it to other things and I can quickly show you how there is so much on the internet to figure out how to use Twine. And so it's really a really simple way to make these sort of choose your own adventure games.

[34:48] And so this is kind of meta, that the purpose of this wasn't really to evoke any feelings. The original purpose was to teach how to use Twine. But then I ended up getting over a 140 thousand clicks onto this, which was just sort of unbelievable and not really expected. And I think that shows how telling these stories, how using narratives can help people get in a mindset or in the shoes of an individual's experience. And there are cool ways that you can code the game.

[35:27] So the story is about a black trans disabled individual on campus in the fall. And you sort of get the experience of what it's like to try to avoid COVID. And I can actually program into that how likely it is that you will get COVID based on the choices that you make. Which is like a nice piece of a nice way to be able to teach students how to program. You can use Twine to teach programming, but you can also use Twine to teach storytelling. And you can also use Twine to teach empathy.

[36:06] And so I think all of these reasons, I guess this really has just become a commercial for Twine, which is not what I meant to do, but I think it's awesome, as a tool to use. And so I will drop the link in the chat. And if you all want to play through it, it takes about four minutes. And so I will hand it back over to Derek.

Derek: [36:30] All right. Thank you, Cait. Okay. And just for completion, you actually made a few different Twine stories, correct?

Cait: [36:37] Yes. The first one is from a perspective of an undergrad student, and there's one from the perspective of faculty, one from the perspective of staff, and one from the perspective of grad students trying to sort of demonstrate that the way that you, given your role, are anticipating that you will experience COVID is not necessarily the way that everyone is experiencing COVID. And I was hopeful that it might have caused more changes than it did. And maybe that was really naive and hopeful of me.

Derek: [37:16] When did you release these Twine stories? It was over the summer, right?

Cait: [37:21] Yes. I released the first one on June 15th.

Derek: [37:25] Okay. So you were, I'm going to take the first question here. You were kind of making some predictions about what life might be like on campus for different types of individuals this fall. Now that we're in November, do you think that your stories captured some important elements of those experiences as they played out?

Cait: [37:44] I'm not sure, and I will tell you a little bit about my positionality. Part of that story was my own, right. I have actually not been on campus since March 9th, I think it was. I have not left my house more than a dozen times since March. And so I actually have no idea what it's like out there in the real-world right now because I can't leave. And so I think you all would actually be better assessors of how it actually has captured what's going on.

[38:17] But I do think it has accurately captured the feelings of a lot of people, that a lot of people reached out, telling me how scared they were. I also had quite a few parents reach out telling me how, parents of college students, telling me how they hadn't even thought about what it would be like for anybody else. They knew that their undergrad student was struggling being alone. So they just wanted to put their undergrad student on campus. But that they actually kind of had their mind open by the idea that going to campus is not the best option for everybody.

Derek: [39:01] Yeah. And actually, Elizabeth, would you mind sharing your question about the kind of ethical considerations that you wondered?

Elizabeth Barna (attendee): [39:07] Yeah, sure. So I'm better at writing than I am at speaking. But my question was essentially, as somebody who studies human rights violations and is really interested in, you know, anti-racist and justice-oriented education. I'm curious as to how when using games in the classroom or in any other teaching environment for the panelists, what ethical considerations have you made and balancing the idea of creating this new way or, you know, using this way that's very interactive and engaging but also not trivializing experiences that are traumatic?

[39:43] I'm thinking of the Unsilence Project, Dr. Danny Cohen, and he's created a bunch of simulations and games having to do with the Holocaust and other traumatic histories. And he calls them serious games and has certain limitations, like he will never include, have it be from the perspective of a victim or a perpetrator. And he's very careful in how he does that. And that made me think, oh, games don't have to be trivializing. So I'm really curious about what ethical considerations you all have made or what challenges you might have bumped into?

Holly: [40:21] You know, I'll take it from my side. I, you know, I've taught the History of Pandemics before and I've never gamified it. But I find that students keep, sort of his arm's length approach to their experience or to their understanding of the human experience. And I was concerned about that is, you know, will it allow them to, to get deeper into the human dimensions of experiencing plague? Or will it just be sort of a trivial experience?

[40:56] I think given the circumstances right now, I think that students treat it with a lot more nuance. I also think that it was really helpful, I also worried, you know, okay, I'm doing the Grim Reaper Lottery. We don't know where this is going. Is this going to hit a little bit too close to home for students? If anything, what I've found for the students is that they were already primed to sort of want to understand their characters better. At the same time, I think it was a relief to them to be in a pandemic setting in the game and be able to be another person, right?

[41:39] We're all experiencing the pandemic as our own person, at least now, have a chance to get an arm's length. It's a weird sort of flip, if that makes any sense of what it was before where they were arm's length, and that wasn't a great thing. And the game allows them to be slightly arm's length away from their own pandemic. And that's a good thing. And it was this relief and you know there were silly times like I would, I had, oh, what is it from the Harry Potter game? The ones the scary guys who suck the breath out a of you or whatever.

Derek: [42:10] Dementors.

Holly: [42:13] Right. So anytime, so I was using that theme song when they would come in to announce the Grim Reaper Lottery. Of course, that evokes a whole bunch of laughter on the students. And so to be able to take the seriousness of our moment and the seriousness of a past moment and still be able to laugh around it was really a remarkable thing, but there were definitely ethical layers to that, that I needed to think through before I was ready to decide I was going to do the game.

Shaul: [42:40] The laughter reminded me, I don't know if you can see this. This is a book that was published during the Soviet dream movement by activists to raise awareness called the *Jokes of Oppression: Humor of Soviet Jews.* So humor was a part of the movement. Humor is a resource that people who were, who were facing oppression were using in their own defense is a way of getting of getting through this.

[43:07] For me, because I'm not just doing the simulation, we're also going meta on it. So I feel like these are college students and we're able to by asking the question, Elizabeth, that you're asking, that's another level of learning that I think is valuable. So that's one of the things that we engaged in conversation. And what does it mean to teach this in this way? What does it mean when some of the camp counselors were playing the KGB as cartoon villains, for example? And we process that. There's also in the chat, Dylan Kistler wrote something.

Elizabeth: [43:47] Yeah, I thought that comment was really helpful. And especially Shaul was my dissertation advisor. And, you know, we talked a lot about tourism and how tourism isn't necessarily this trivial thing and that it can be really meaningful to people. And I really liked Dylan's comment about games, that they're not inherently trivializing a given topic.

Derek: [44:09] Dylan, would you like to say a little more about that?

Dylan Kistler: (attendee) [44:15] Yeah, I don't know. Like as someone who loves to study games, I like to do this really wishful thinking that one day there won't be a genre called serious games, right? Because people will just inherently know that there can be a serious and comedic, a playful and not playful element. And there are games out there which really are not very playful and fun. They're few and far between, but I think there's a lot of space for those games.

[44:39] But I think just like many novels on very serious topics can have irony and satire. So to a game can be playful and still treat serious topics really well. So if anything, it's more like the population in our culture is very illiterate on how to play games thoughtfully. We're all pretty literate at how to read literature thoughtfully. We can read something that's very comedic and still take thoughtfulness out of it. But most of us are pretty illiterate with playing games thoughtfully. And so not a lot of citizens in our country, I think, can approach a game playfully and still take something thoughtfully from it. But I think that's less a failing of the medium and more a failing of how we learn how to play. We don't really teach people how to play thoughtfully in our culture.

Derek: [45:17] Cait, I'm wondering, do you have thoughts on the kind of the ethics of using something that can be playful to delve into some pretty serious subjects?

Cait: [45:28] Yeah, well, so I thought a lot about this and I worried a lot about trying to, I mean, if you play this story is just bad things continue to happen to you right and it really doesn't matter what choices you make, the bad things just keep coming. And that felt really heavy. And I think part of what is useful about a game is that you do get to step out of it when it gets too heavy. If you feel kind of overwhelmed by it, you do get to just leave. And so I think that it provides a good medium for learning about struggles that other people have or oppression that happened historically because you can sort of do it at your own pace.

[46:17] Which I mean, unless you are a member of that marginalized or oppressed group and you don't get to just step out of it, you just step back into the world. But I think having that ability to step away might allow people to engage with these concepts more willingly and more readily. But I think that there is also the challenge of not trivializing it, especially like, I don't, I am not a part of all of the marginalized groups who I have written from the perspective of in the stories. And so I think it's a very fine line to walk where it's not sort of taking that on when it's not your thing to take on and speak from.

Derek: [47:10] Well, I'm reminded of Holly's comments about the arm's length, distance, right? So having a game, the player has a little more control over how they engage. And so that level of autonomy can help them actually engage more by being able to kind of dial it in or out as they feel comfortable. I love that. I do, we've just got a couple of minutes left and I'm going to ask a very Center for Teaching question. How do you, how do you help your students reflect on or synthesize what they've learned through these types of games and

simulations?

Shaul: [47:45] We were doing class discussion in the session following.

Holly: [47:48] And Reacting to the Past has a post-mortem in this case, it was pretty appropriate, post-mortem session where you debrief with the students. What did you learn? What were your thoughts? How did you nuance them? I also had students write, after each vote, can you tell me, did you meet your objectives? What are some things that happened that I might not know about? And it's so interesting because there are things that are happening behind the scenes that you have no idea that somebody is doing this or dirty dealing another person. And they did a very similar thing at the end where they reflected on their own interactions. And then the underlying significance of the game. I think debriefing is very important.

Cait: [48:40] So I didn't actually teach this like for the content, but I can tell you that it popped up on a bunch of forums on the internet. And I could sort of watch people have conversations about it in real time where they criticized it, that there weren't enough options and then a person would respond that's the point. The point is that there are no options. And somebody wrote, the only way to win this game is not to play. And I was like ding-ding-ding. You figured it out, you got it. And so I think maybe in making stories like this, opening it up for feedback or criticism, because that's what the internet and forums are, right? It's just the place for criticism, maybe would help them to sort of like walk through what the point of it was and why the game was designed or structured in the way that it was.

Holly: [49:43] You know, Cait, I was struck. I remember when you released it thinking, wow, she's got this clarity on where we are right now and where we are still. But we certainly most certainly in June, we're all like swimming around and having no idea where we're going. And then Shaul, the uncertainty of doing this game in a tent and modifying it. And then certainly, you know, playing my own game, the uncertainty, you don't know where this is going to lead. Each game looks different. I've played the French Revolution where Louis the 14th. I'm sorry, Louis the 16th survives and the monarchy continues and I've had other ones where he doesn't. And so I think with gaming and teaching, you really have to more than even ever, you have to really give yourself into the uncertainty of the process, right? And that sort of makes it fun and scary at the same time. (music)

Derek: [50:45] That was Holly Tucker, Mellon Foundation chair in the humanities. Shaul

Kelner, associate professor of sociology and Jewish studies. And Cait Kirby, PhD candidate in Biological Sciences. I'm thankful to have such creative and thoughtful colleagues here at Vanderbilt and that they would take time to share their experiences on the panel and now with a wider audience on this podcast.

[51:08] We have a series on the Center for Teaching blog we're calling Never Going Back. It's about the technologies and pedagogies that faculty have learned to use during the pandemic teaching that they plan to keep using when life returns to something like normal. I heard a never going back element in Holly's presentation. Now that she's used Slack and student created videos as part of her reacting to the past games, I expect she'll keep doing so in the future. Certainly, having those private channels on Slack opens up a lot of options for student role-playing.

[51:38] I also heard some sense of what teaching in the future might be like from Shaul in his comments about making the absent present. I think most instructors would like to think we'll be returning to fully in-person classes at some point in the future. And while I'm sure some classes will be, now that we've experienced remote learning and hybrid teaching, I expect some incentives to continue those practices in some form. A student athlete might not have to miss class if they're on the road to a game, but available to Zoom in during class time. Or students who might have come to class sick in the olden days might play it a little bit safer and participate remotely in the future from their dorm rooms.

[52:20] The ways that Shaul worked to make absent students present last fall might be helpful as other instructors think about hybrid teaching in the future. And as for Cait Kirby's work, well, she's pretty amazing. And I'm glad that her Twine stories got so much attention during a time when the future was so uncertain. Cait does a fantastic job of helping the higher education community understand diverse perspectives and experiences within that community. If you're not following her on Twitter, you probably should. See the show notes for links to her Twitter account and her website where you can find her various Twine stories and a lot of other resources she's created.

[52:55] Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and The Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries. You can find us on Twitter @leadinglinespod and on the web at leadinglinespod.com. This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes, the first and third Monday of each month, more or less. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening and be safe. (music)