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Chapter 8: Playing Critically: Using Digital Intercultural Simulation Games in Higher Education

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Abstract: Intercultural educators have long used simulation games as pedagogical tools. Research has indicated their great potential for purposes such as teaching ethics and civics which align with the aims of critical pedagogy. These include facilitating dialogue, illustrating the dynamics of systemic structures, the centrality of language and communication, and understanding the fluidity and complexity of systemic power and privilege in general (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Still, there are also certain difficulties or weaknesses, the most notable of which is the juxtaposition of simulations' tendency to simplify reality and critical pedagogy's aim to uncover the complex ways in which structures and power are intertwined. This chapter considers possible starting points for designing and utilising simulation games in critical intercultural education. Looking at game design, the concepts of games of emergence and procedural rhetoric are considered. Regarding gameplay and the following debriefing, the concept of a 'third space' is explored as a possible way into imagining differently.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Educational Games, Third Space, Serious Games, Simulation

Introduction

Intercultural communication education has a long history of utilising different activating tasks, role play, drama or simulations, theatre or creative writing or social media and other online tools (Huber & Reynolds, 2014). This history dates back to the 1960s and 70s and has seen its ups and downs over the decades. In this chapter, aimed both at intercultural communication instructors as well as game developers, I will explore the potential of developing and using digital simulation games in critical intercultural communication pedagogy in the context of higher education. I use the term simulation games as Dorn (1989) defines it: 'A simulation game is an exercise that has the basic characteristics of both games and simulations […]' (p. 3). That is, they are rule-based activities designed to represent or model a certain external reality.

The reasons for using simulation games in education have varied, but they typically include, for example, making learning more direct, lively and motivating. Such games are often seen as including an affective dimension that allows for exploring ethical and moral viewpoints, as well as for becoming aware of and changing personal values and attitudes (Dorn, 1989). Similar reasoning can be found for using digital games (also called video games or computer games, depending on the context) as pedagogical tools (Schrier, 2021). Especially the way games afford agency to emerge and matter and their flexibility in adapting to players' needs and learning process have been proposed as central features in their educational promise (Gee, 2003). One should also not underestimate the fact that digital games have simply become an integral part of contemporary media landscapes, especially for younger people.

Simulation games seem to have an exceptionally good fit with pedagogical approaches such as experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and pedagogies drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural

research. In experiential learning, experiences, perceptions, cognitive processes and behaviour come together in a kind of holistic approach to learning that allows the learner to connect abstract concepts to personal insight, while the sociocultural perspective emphasises the importance of play and learners' collaborative social interaction. I propose that games and play also have the potential to contribute to critical pedagogy's 'commitments' (Fassett & Warren, 2007), including dialogue, how the everyday and mundane connects to larger systemic structures, the centrality of language and communication, and understanding the fluidity and complexity of systemic power and privilege in general.

Looking at digital gaming specifically, research has explored, for example, games as means of inducing changes in explicit and implicit attitudes towards culturally distinct groups (Alhabash & Wise, 2012), increasing cultural heritage awareness (Anderson et al., 2010), reversing racial in-group bias (Hasler et al., 2017), as well as increasing global empathy and interest in learning about other countries (Bachen et al., 2012). In their review of sixty-two studies into the topic, Shliakhovchuk and Muñoz García (2020) propose that:

> Video games have the potential to help to acquire cultural knowledge and develop intercultural literacy, socio-cultural literacy, cultural awareness, self-awareness, and the cultural understanding of different geopolitical spaces, to reinforce or weaken stereotypes, and to some extent also facilitate the development of intercultural skills. (p. 40)

However, until today, few digital simulation games exist designed specifically for the purpose of intercultural education. Of the ones that do, most are either single player games, or games designed for specific controlled research settings.

Using digital intercultural simulation games in the context of critically aligned pedagogy does not come without its challenges. Not only are there several challenges related to implementing critical intercultural communication pedagogy in the first place (Chen & Lawless, 2019), but certain specific questions related to games and play and how they tie in with the overall educational situation also have to be addressed. Over the next paragraphs I will present what I see as the main challenges, and then move on to consider possible solutions. I base this discussion on my experience as an educator with years of experience in utilising simulation games in the context of higher education. I have personally played and analysed all the simulation games referred to in this chapter.

Critical challenges

Popular methods and approaches used in intercultural education have been criticised for representing essentialist ideas about culture and identity and for not taking intersectionality, power, and reflexivity enough into account (Dervin, 2016). Traditional intercultural education has also been criticised for viewing intercultural communication as detached from contextual features such as historical or political tensions (see Holliday, 2011). A similar critique can be levelled against most games and game-like exercises. Even if many traditional simulation games do not refer to existing nationalities but rather opt for using 'synthetic cultures' (Hofstede & Pedersen, 1999), their tendency to simplify complex reality to the level of caricature is often at odds with a more 'fluid' (see Dervin, 2016) understanding of culture.

Game-based learning in the context of intercultural instruction has traditionally had to come to terms with the question of how to best conceptualise and operationalise something as complex and abstract as culture (Wiggins, 2012). This is a difficult question, since at the heart of

simulation is the endeavour to represent something without actually 'being it'. Simulations reduce reality to manageable proportions and can therefore never be quite as complex as the reality they set out to model.

For example, in the game *REAL LIVES* (Educational Simulations, 2010), the player is given the possibility of 'inhabiting' a random individual's life story. The game proceeds in turns (years), during which various events are presented to the player, and choices can be made. The game is built on extensive statistical information concerning living conditions and political and economic realities around the world. While the simulation tries to be as realistic as possible, the choices the player gets to make, such as when to move away from home, or what kind of romantic interest to pursue, end up feeling detached due to their lack of realistic consequences. While modelling certain societal features faithfully (i.e., income, education, illness), the game skips others altogether (prejudice, family dynamics, religious tensions). Ultimately, many of the features that end up being simulated are the ones that are the easiest to quantify.

In game design, there is an inherent and perhaps inevitable focus on structural features or game design 'patterns' and 'elements' (Björk & Holopainen, 2005). This focus is surely necessary, as it details 'the possibilities, results, and the reasons for the player to interact within the game' (Björk & Holopainen, 2005, p. 3). At the same time, it may end up leading towards essentialist notions of culture, such as the idea that culture varies systematically and predictably, or that it is indeed possible to discern certain discrete 'units' of culture that could then be learned, compared, and contrasted with one another. In his critique of *REAL LIVES*, Crogan (2008) argues that the 'militarytechnoscientific' mindset manifested in the game through its reliance on statistical analysis, modelling and prediction cannot readily lead to 'an educative or compassionate encounter with the other' (Life skills section, para. 9). Instead, what the player

faces is a mass of statistical data and the task of figuring out the algorithm that is at the heart of the game.

Even if the game design itself, and the instructor leading the exercise, manage to sidestep the dangers of essentialism and negative stereotyping, it is possible that the learners or players will fail to avoid such an outcome. For example, analysing Japanese EFL university students' reflections on a simulation game that dealt with the theme of racism, Hammond (2006) noted that discursive strategies that subtly support racism may appear even when the intended outcomes of the simulation have, on the face of it, officially been reached. An earlier study on US university students showed a similar dilemma: participation in a simulation game actually led to an increase in students' dogmatism and ethnocentrism (Bruschke et al., 1993). Put simply, games and play are almost fundamentally unpredictable, which is also seen in the plethora of 'effects' that simulation games have been shown to have on their players (Dorn, 1989). Overall, scholars often end up urging teachers to be careful when using simulation games for highly sensitive or critical purposes, such as tackling racial inequality.

In summary, there may be several challenges when attempting to utilise simulation games as a component of critical intercultural education. Since at the heart of critical intercultural communication pedagogy is the aim to 'understand, critique, transform, and intervene upon the dynamics of power and domination embedded inside and outside classroom walls' (Toyosaki & Atay, 2018, ix), then what kind of possibilities as well as liabilities can simulation games present? What would it take to use digital intercultural simulation games not as simple tools, but as sites for exploring issues and viewpoints that other methods may have difficulties in approaching? Could playing intercultural simulation games even possibly change our understanding of how culture can be understood? Is it possible to use a dynamic and multi-

layered conceptualisation of culture (Piller, 2017) as a starting point to developing and utilising intercultural simulation games? Over the next sections I will offer some tentative answers to these questions. Specifically, I will explore factors related to game design and the simulation setting, the creation of so-called third spaces during and after gameplay, and the dynamics of debriefing.

Setting the stage for critical play and learning

Game design

Even before a game begins, a critical orientation to intercultural communication instruction can be made visible through the design of the game and the simulation setting. First, it is important to note that there are implicit values, including moral values, as well as cultural assumptions embedded in game design, and these are beyond the influence of the players (Dorn, 1989; Gee, 2003). What this means in practice is that a simulation game based on an essentialist understanding of cultures and intercultural or intergroup communication as something that happens between neatly defined groups does not become less so just by inserting it into a critically oriented educational setting. Rather, the design of the game should align with, or at least not directly contradict, principles of critical intercultural pedagogy. Perhaps the most pertinent outcome that follows from this realisation is that, unfortunately, many top-selling video games are not truly compatible with critically aligned education. Content analytical research has systematically pointed out issues in best-selling commercial games such as lack of racial diversity, under-representation and stereotypical representation of minority groups, and an overall hegemonic cultural framing (Shliakhovchuk & Muñoz García, 2020).

Instead, critically oriented game design could draw on principles such as Antal and Friedman's (2008) process of 'negotiating reality', where '… people become aware of their culturally shaped interpretations to a given situation, openly inquire into the interpretations of others, jointly test their interpretations, and design action strategies that make sense to all parties' (p. 364). This is a decidedly constructionist viewpoint, emphasising how social reality is co-created and the uniqueness and complexity of different situations. Similarly aligned design principles could stem from Holliday's (2016) proposal that intercultural education should focus on the human agency evident in so-called small culture formation, defined as the everyday forming and re-forming of culture. This approach would focus the attention to similarities (threads of experience), while trying to avoid 'blocks' of difference that are typical for naïve generalisations regarding i.e. nationality, religion, or race. As a design principle, the small culture formation approach resonates with Rathje's (2007) conceptualisation of intercultural competence as the ability to create a shared normality, which in turn creates cohesion.

The idea that ties these viewpoints together is that with regard to intercultural communication, there is nothing necessarily stable or consistent that one should 'learn by heart'. Furthermore, their emphasis on social construction means that they do not situate 'competence' or relevant learning goals as a property of the individual. Instead, a process-oriented view that highlights the relational dimension of competence as something shared and socially constructed seems to be a better fit. The goal should be game design that is sensitive and open to the idea that, in reality, social interaction is always essentially interpersonal contact between individuals.

How, then, could one design an intercultural simulation game that highlights interaction, social construction of reality, and responsible agency? While this is surely a question for future game designers and educators to tackle, I will propose two viewpoints that I believe are central in

this endeavour: that digital intercultural simulation games should be designed to strive for emergence, and that in doing so the notion of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) should be explored.

The first viewpoint proposes that digital intercultural simulation games should strive to be games of emergence rather than games of progression (Juul, 2002). From this viewpoint, the less strict the game's narrative is and the more it allows players to choose the way they want to proceed, the better. This may sound simple, and indeed, it is the way many face-to-face simulation games work, but it is a surprisingly rare approach in digital simulation games. This is most probably due to the difficulty of programming truly adaptive and open-ended simulations. For example, Zielke and Linehan (2009) in their report on creating a 'first person cultural trainer' claim that 'since the exact situation that must be modelled at any given time is unknown, the simulated environment must be adaptable' (p. 3). And since many of the so-called serious games are created with very limited resources, it may seem easier to craft a strictly controlled narrative path. While such games may work just as well as, say, literature or theatre in conveying viewpoints and inducing empathy, they distinctly lack the qualities that are important to simulations. Additionally, they risk operationalising culture as a set of recognisable and learnable content. What the viewpoint of emergence enables, instead, is to focus on the *dynamics* of negotiating culture, its shifts and moves (see Zhou & Pilcher, 2019). Ultimately, focusing on emergence means focusing on player agency and accountability. It would be interesting to see more attempts along the lines of some traditional non-digital intercultural simulation games, where players are given a certain starting-point (perhaps a deck of cards and some written rules), but where it is completely up to the players how the gameplay develops from that point onward.

The second viewpoint is known as procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007). As Bogost argues, digital games can be used as tools for persuasion and influence. The way they work is through rule-based representations and interactions, and not simply the content of the game. Games enable us to create, explain, and understand processes that may otherwise remain opaque or difficult to grasp. From this viewpoint, there is a fundamental difference between telling someone about social injustice and letting them experience it themselves as a part of gameplay (whether as someone who suffers from injustice or someone who perpetrates it). If a simulation game puts its players into a situation where they have to make a difficult choice, then that choice is made more meaningful by the fact that the players have to make it themselves (even if nudged in the general direction). In this, procedural rhetoric also aligns well with early characterisations of simulation games that emphasise role playing (Dorn, 1989).

A recent example of an intercultural simulation game that tries to follow this route is *Moving Tomorrow* (ESCP Business School, 2019). The game follows the logic and mechanics of a typical adventure game, where there is a single large plot but the player has freedom in how to approach it. The player character is a new employee of an international company who has to navigate both personal, professional and broader cultural topics in her attempt to find her place in the company. The game includes quite a lot of didactic content, as is typical of serious games designed for educational settings, much of which is designed to explain either the player character or another character's behaviour. Unsurprisingly, the game's approach to operationalising culture is often simplified. For example, nationality is emphasised over other identity categories, and the game presents a world where 'diversity' mostly becomes a matter of skin colour (there are, for example, no old or overweight characters, and almost everyone is highly educated and able to speak a shared lingua franca). However, through its story, the game also manages to facilitate empathy by hinting at the lived life behind a certain behaviour, as

well as the impact of choices made. In this, the potential of procedural rhetoric can be, if not always witnessed, then at least imagined. For example, while playing the game, I often noticed I stopped to ponder over the options available to me, trying to anticipate possible repercussions down the line.

As Bogost (2021) lays out, the promise of procedural rhetoric centres on the notion that many of the big, important problems of the world are complex systems, and therefore would benefit from approaches that are good at simulating such systems. The goal, in short, is to help develop 'system literacy' (p. 31) and, by doing so, help people understand and cope with complexity. But, as he says, the decade between now and the moment when he introduced the concept has proven that simpler rhetorics have often prevailed. In the end, Bogost (2021), proposes 'a kind of stark realism' (pp. 36–37) as the way to proceed with the concept of procedural rhetoric.

In practice, I often feel that the principle of procedural rhetoric can be accentuated by adding transparency to the game design. First, aligning with Bolten (1993), I propose that a crucial starting point for any kind of design of digital intercultural simulation games should be the opening up of the concept of culture, and what it means in the context of that particular game. This could help players appreciate similar structures in society at large. Such a game might also show a log of choices made and actions taken by the players, therefore contributing to the concept of accountability. Second, while many traditional intercultural simulation games (such as Sivasailam Thiagarajan's BARNGA or R. Garry Shirts' Bafa-Bafa) do 'deceive' their participants at least initially by not telling them everything there is to know about the upcoming experience, the final impression left in the participants' minds should be of enlightenment, of seeing clearly the way the different aspects of the simulation were designed to work together.

There are many more design challenges specifically related to critical communication pedagogy that go well beyond the scope of this chapter. For example, game designers could seek to answer questions such as: How to model the way communication both enables and constrains participation? How to design tangible practices that have the potential to increase participants' agency? How to emphasise viewpoints such as intersectionality, collaboration, and the impact of underlying structures? While it would be unrealistic to expect that any single simulation game could provide satisfactory answers to all such questions, I propose it should be the task of critically oriented designers to at least try to take them into account.

Setting the stage for open 'third spaces' in gameplay

As mentioned before, simulation games work by simplifying complex systems. However, this tendency to simplify complexity is evidently hazardous in fields such as intercultural communication, intergroup communication, anti-racist education etc. where the whole purpose is to *not* reinforce or reify existing essentialist categories; nor is it to reduce intercultural communication to something generic and bland in the spirit of 'celebrating global citizenship'. In order to escape the kind of banal and essentialist advice for which intercultural communication education has often been criticised (e.g., Piller, 2017, p. 62), we need to develop and be open to more hybrid forms of imagining 'us' together.

Here, I would like to suggest the concept of 'the third space' (Bhabha, 1994) as a possible way forward. With this concept, I mean certain kinds of creative and transformative 'spaces' that are close to the kind of hybridity that Bhabha (1990) talks about:

> […] the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it … [and] gives rise to something different,

> something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation. (p. 211)

The concept of the third space can be and has been criticised (Holliday, 2011; Kubota, 2016) among other things for (perhaps unintentionally) recreating the concept of solid cultural spheres between which the third space is then created. Indeed, for there to be a 'third', there must be a first and a second, and therefore the language used in contemplating such 'crossings' can lead straight back to where the analysis was trying not to go. Still, I feel the concept continues to hold promise, and agree here with Adrian Holliday, who in an interview with Vivien Xiaowei Zhou and Nick Pilcher said:

> My co-researcher Sara Amadasi and I were thinking that the third space is a moment – a place – in which we can stand back and see things in a different way. It's a space of investigation. For a moment we said 'well, actually, this is what researchers do', but that's not enough, because it's got to be for everybody. (Zhou & Pilcher, 2019, p. 3)

There is reason to believe that play, especially play that is designed towards perspective-taking, allows us to embrace such moments. For example, Hasler et al.'s (2017) study illustrated how virtual reality embodiment may enable participants to reverse racial in-group bias – at least for the duration of the experiment. What is especially worthwhile for the discussion in this chapter is that according to the authors, this kind of embodiment 'goes beyond traditional forms of perspective taking […] it provides the opportunity to actually *experience* an alternative racial identity' (Hasler et al., 2017, p. 12). While one cannot say much about the long-term effects of such experiments, one can imagine that in certain situations even a short-term effect might open up a space for what one could call 'imagining differently'.

Finally, I want to highlight here that the concept of open and transformative third spaces carries a strong connotation of 'us'. Us here, together, imagining reality anew. What may help facilitate such a stance is the phenomenon of 'positive interdependence', a key aspect of collaborative learning (Johnson et al., 1991). Positive interdependence characterises situations where students can succeed only if all the other students succeed as well, and that therefore end up bringing learners closer together. As Alencar and De la Hera Conde-Pumpido (2018) propose in their analysis of the possibilities of digital games for intercultural education, games' affordances may well support cooperative learning components by facilitating positive interdependence.

The challenge is to find ways to let students and educators using digital games and simulations for intercultural higher education create and explore third spaces in a creative, non-restrictive way; in a way that does not re-create neo-essentialist discourses or 'us' and 'them' (Holliday, 2011), and that, ultimately, helps students conceive and then construct (new) common ground. Such an approach, which is by default fleeting and built on shared negotiation, should be seen as a tool and not as an outcome; not as the kind of hybridity that itself becomes a fixed categorisation or a solid entity (Kubota, 2016). In addition to the game design elements referred to above, I propose that the single most important tool for achieving a fruitful third space in the context of utilising digital intercultural simulation games is debriefing.

Debriefing as an entry-way into the critical

The importance of proper debriefing is known to anyone who has been using simulations or games in educational contexts. There must be enough time not only to play the game, but also to discuss it in detail (Dorn, 1989). The importance of debriefing is also closely in keeping with one of the key commitments of critical pedagogy, namely, reflexivity. Reflexivity, 'the process

of exploring how we, as teachers and researchers, create the phenomena we observe, through our assumptions, values, past experiences, language choices, and so on' (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 50) does not come about automatically, but requires support.

Thinking of digital simulation games specifically, the affordances of the digital medium could be utilised in many ways to support debriefing. Overall, digital games often present an 'outcome' screen, or give the player some kind of feedback on how they have fared with their choices. Some even show deeper analysis of the actions during the game. For example, in *Moving Tomorrow*, the player has the option of going over previous events and earlier information after each 'chapter'. If multiple students played the game at the same pace (e.g., one chapter a week), this information could work as a solid basis for them to have a critical, comparative discussion. The question of how best to facilitate critical reflection is clearly an area that could be explored further in both game design and teaching practice.

The importance of the human actor in debriefing is illustrated by Crogan (2008), who posits that an educational simulation game may sometimes work 'best as an educative interactive experience when it incites speculation on its failure to work' (last para.). That is, sometimes the fact that the simulation is apparently 'off' or somehow jarring to the player may enable them to see beyond the design, and engage in critical, meta-level discussion. I see this as somewhat similar to the way critical pedagogy requires the micro-level interactions that happen within the simulation game to be connected to the macro level of policies and societal structures in general. What this might look like, for example, is a re-alignment of focus from individual behaviour to issues of systemic power and privilege. And this kind of re-alignment is still, quite simply, easier for humans than for machines to do.

One approach to debriefing that I myself have found fruitful is to extend the discussion onto the meta-level. Put simply, this means opening the inner workings of the simulation game to the scrutiny of its players. In my experience, students often enjoy ‘looking behind the curtain’ after the play-session. Potential questions include what kind of instruction material is provided to the teacher, how the game could be improved, or what kind of theoretical or practical underpinnings can be recognised behind the game’s design. Such questions can help students both distance themselves from the immediate experience of the simulation and also reach a more analytical and theory-driven stance than may otherwise be possible.

One should also be upfront about the fact that embracing the critical paradigm in education means taking a (political) stance. There is a *directedness* to one’s thinking and social activity. While it is not impossible to adopt such a directed stance in designing games, it may sit somewhat ill-at-ease with certain central features of games and play – namely interaction and emergence (cf. Juul, 2002). If everything is decided beforehand and the player is offered no choices, it is usually considered either a boring game or not a game at all. In role-playing games with a gamemaster, this kind of game-play (or lack of it) is referred to as ‘railroading’ (Domsch, 2013). So why should this present a problem? Quite simply, because the more the game is designed for complexity and emergence, the more unpredictable its outcomes become. As Bogost (2021) argues, ‘when they are played, the effects of persuasive games are often very different than the ones their creators might expect’ (p. 33). Players may end up trying to ‘break the game’, or ‘play it wrong’, therefore actually playing the game critically (Flanagan, 2009) or transgressively (Aarseth, 2007). They may end up learning quite different things from those the game’s designers set out to teach. It may also be that certain features that the design saw as fundamental to the gameplay experience never surface at all if players have enough freedom

to navigate the game to their own liking. Rather than aiming to control away player agency, it is then the task of debriefing to serve the goals of critical pedagogy.

In the actual debriefing situation, whether following a digital simulation game or an analogue one, it is definitely necessary to carefully consider the role of the teacher. As studies have shown, the actual role of the teacher during debriefing is seldom simply that of a facilitator, but rather that of an active participant in the interactions (Dieckmann et al., 2009). This is perfectly fine, and even desirable in the context of critical pedagogy. What makes adopting such a position sometimes difficult, however, is the fact that no exercise or teaching situation can exist in a vacuum. For example, depending on the societal context and the topic under scrutiny, factors such as how the teacher may be racially positioned compared to the students (Hammond, 2006) may need to be taken into account.

The questions tackled by critical pedagogy are complex and sensitive. It should therefore come as no surprise that the answers may also be complex and have to be constantly negotiated. Kubota (2016) offers a tangible example of such difficulties. Speaking of the tension between hybridity and rootedness in the context of indigenous language maintenance, she describes the difficulty of finding balance between two opposing poles, namely, '[the] political efforts to seek collective rights to identity and attempts to support indigenous youths who negotiate their hybrid identity' (Kubota, 2016, p. 483). Should a simulation game deal with such dynamics, there clearly cannot be any ready-made solutions to such tensions. Already helping students become aware of such issues and learning to discuss them openly can be enough of a learning goal for one exercise. Here, creating the third space through debriefing allows for a kind of destabilising of what otherwise seems stable, and opening up the discursive conditions necessary for tackling difficult questions.

In conclusion, debriefing continues to hold an important place in the use of digital simulation games in critical intercultural communication pedagogy. This places high demands on teachers and facilitators especially when it comes to their own reflexivity. This is, however, nothing new for critically aligned teachers. For example, in Chen and Lawless' (2019) study, teachers invested in critical communication pedagogy described their own participation by highlighting reflexivity, the importance of building (self) critical consciousness, being truthful and honest instead of playing a specific role, and so on. Overall, I would say these approaches could be grouped under an approach of caring and embodied accountability.

Conclusion

Games and play continue to have an important place in the field of higher education. Many scholars see great promise in games, even when extended to topics such as ethics and civics. As Schrier (2021) argues:

> Games are ethical systems, and players are moral actors who engage in them. Games can help people practice relevant critical thinking and inquiry skills such as reasoning, decision-making, problem-solving, systems thinking and analysis, interpretation, evaluation, information gathering, and design and creation. They can pose problems and quests or act like morality tales and ethical case studies […]. (pp. 11–12)

There is also increasing evidence of the positive potential of both 'serious' and 'for entertainment' digital games in intercultural higher education (Shliakhovchuk & Muñoz García, 2020).

This chapter has explored some of the ways in which digital simulation games could be made use of in the context of critical intercultural pedagogy. The argument here is that games and simulations are especially relevant for the constructivist and sociocultural view of learning, because they allow the student to adopt an active and critical role in their own learning process (Checa-Romero, 2016) and because they have the potential to align with the 'commitments' (Fassett & Warren, 2007) of critical pedagogy.

Looking back in time, I am struck by how vibrant the early literature and spirit of experimentation was regarding educational simulation games in the 1970s. While it may be appropriate to say that the development has since stagnated (Fowler & Pusch, 2010), I feel that there is actually a surprising amount of untapped potential for updating some of the early simulation game designs and bringing them to digital platforms. However, there are definite design challenges when thinking of simulation games from the viewpoint of critical intercultural pedagogy in higher education. For example, if one approaches culture as something enacted and negotiated, as something by default multiple and contested, indeed as a site of struggle (Collier, 2015), then the characteristic of simulations in simplifying complexity may seem to pose an insurmountable challenge. We simply need more, and braver, experimentation in the field, possibly embracing the spirit of Juul's (2002) 'games of emergence', in which the simulations should emphasise interactive approaches in their operationalisation of culture and intercultural contact.

We also need more research on how digital intercultural simulation games fit in with critical pedagogy in practice. Even though most contemporary digital intercultural simulation games represent 'stand-alone' games, in practice their use in educational contexts always requires some form of integration into a broader course design. This involves answering questions such

as what readings, other course work, discussions, media, etc. there are to support the simulation game; how pre-briefing is organised; what kind of learning outcomes and effects may be expected, and how long they might last; and how a positive learning atmosphere can be created when setting the stage for the simulation.

In addition, one central challenge related to ideals about creating the third spaces necessary for critically aligned pedagogical discourse derives from the fact that simulation games often require significant amounts of time to play through. Teachers should be prepared to answer questions such as whether students are expected to play the game before coming to class or during it, and how one balances the time devoted to teaching with the actual playing of the game (Shliakhovchuk, 2018). With regard to digital games, there is still the added challenge of software and hardware requirements.

There is good reason to believe in the promise of employing digital intercultural simulation games as a tool of critical pedagogy in higher education. Of course, games and simulations do not work in all contexts, for everyone, or for all purposes. It is difficult to design a simulation game that is simple enough but at the same time avoids the trap of essentialism. Teachers using games may lack necessary training and experience, there may be language-related difficulties, and the unpredictable dynamics of group-level social interaction have to be taken into account (Alencar & De la Hera Conde-Pumpido, 2018). Using digital simulation games for intercultural higher education requires sensitivity and good planning from developers and teachers, as well as a willingness to spend extra time at both the planning and debriefing stages. Still, simulation games also offer the kind of experiential learning and perspective-taking that few other approaches can claim.

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Key take-away points

- Simulation games can support key features of critical intercultural pedagogy.
- Still, there is a tension between the way simulations simplify reality and the way critical pedagogy aims to uncover the complex ties between systemic power and privilege.
- Critically aligned intercultural simulation games should be designed to support interaction between participants and to embrace the concept of emergence.
- Debriefing is a key feature in helping students adopt an active and critical role in their own learning process.
- Both play and debriefing should aim for the principles of 'third spaces' as a means of negotiating shared reality and imagining differently.

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