

Playing (with) POST Cards

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Abstract

This article illustrates through word, image, and design the back-and-forth exchange characteristic of Project Oriented Semantic Trading Cards (or POST Cards), a game-based professional learning ritual relevant to educators' problems of practice. In describing the iterative designs and features of POST Cards, this article intentionally depicts alternative means of narrative and scholarship via imaginative, playful, and visual (re)presentation. Both POST Cards and this inquiry employ a design-based process driven by theory about play, intended to improve education practice, and iteratively co-created with participants. As an annotated and dialogical worked example, this representation of game play moves beyond the monolithic medium of printed text. With the intention to provoke discussion about the content and configuration of inquiry, this article traces the literal and figurative tradeoffs associated with the development and play of POST Cards. In surveying the design and enactment of POST Cards – across two iterations and a related Quote Cards mutation – three design principles are relevant to fostering greater playfulness in higher education: Embrace the inevitability of tradeoffs, invite players to co-create new features and iterations, and create conditions whereby everyday rituals and social practices are transformed into improvisational and discursive play. As an annotated narrative constructed in the form and spirit of POST Cards, this inquiry is notable for presenting an experimental form of multimodal literacy, and also for revealing how higher education settings and practices may be designed as playgrounds upon which to render visionary, risky, and expressive approaches to game-based collaboration and creative scholarship.

Introducing POST Cards

In 2012, we found ourselves in the position of designing a card game for the inaugural Playful Learning Summit at the annual Games Learning Society Conference in Madison, Wisconsin. The aim was simple: Get people talking with each other quickly about deep ideas in a fun way. We decided that there should be something tangible at the core, and even before our thoughts were fully formed, we came up with a name: Project Oriented Semantic Trading Cards, or POST Cards. We drew inspiration from (of course) postcards and trading cards, as well as the University of Southern California's Reality Ends Here film design card game (Watson, 2012) and our mentor Fred Goodman's fascination with educational media that riff on pop culture games, "playthings," and activities (i.e. Goodman, 1984).

This article is, in metaphor and form, a postcard – an aesthetic synthesis of text and image. Unlike the enveloped letter, whose contents are first concealed and then privy to a select audience (too frequently an unfortunate analogy for higher education research and publication), a postcard is a more public act of correspondence. An enduring open and participatory media, the postcard conveys to the intended reader and opportune onlooker a timely and often reflective message. The postcard, as material technology, has long afforded multimodal collaboration and interpretation (Östman, 2004).

Like the turns of a game, in this article we attempt to capture through word, image, and design the back-and-forth exchange characteristic of the POST Cards activity. Deliberately unconventional and mischievous, we embrace play as free movement within a given structure (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). We contend that a social practice like play is as alive within the design and activity of games (e.g. Shell, 2008) as it is generative of novel approaches to academic expression (i.e. Twitter as public scholarship; see Stewart, 2015). Here, we join those seeking alternative means of representation and narrative in scholarly publication. As peer review embraces different media and different types of forums (i.e. *On: Audio Journal for Experimental Art and Visual Culture*; *The Comics Journal*), and as visual representation redefines the possibilities for showcasing academic inquiry (i.e. Czerwiec *et al.*, 2015; Sousanis, 2015), we extend these efforts by imaginatively depicting one game-based learning effort in higher education. Recalling that play is "always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both" (Sicart, 2014, p. 9), this special issue on games in higher education is an appropriate "playground" upon which to render more visionary, risky, and expressive approaches to creative scholarship.

As noted, POST Cards was designed through a partnership among the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Michigan, and Microsoft Research as a game-based approach to project development and professional learning (Holden, 2013; Holden *et al.*, 2014). Unlike games played in higher education for discipline-specific coursework (e.g. medical education; see Graafland *et al.*, 2012) or improvisational campus-wide activity (e.g. media-making; see Jenkins, 2011), POST Cards is a game-based ritual that attends to the importance of "generative collegial exchange" relevant to educators' problems of practice (Horn and Little, 2010). While POST Cards has changed quite a bit through several iterations, a few basic elements have remained the same. Participants at a conference or workshop receive a small number of cards at random. The cards are each printed with an evocative word or phrase, with additional cards (in some versions) having a task or instruction. The participants exchange cards, adding hand-written comments and contact information as they do so. The cards then become part of some sort of group collaboration – depending on the iteration this has taken the form of project planning, concept mapping, or simply discussion. Why *Project Oriented*? Multiple game iterations and mutations have created an embodied ritual whereby the material exchange of cards seeds working groups comprised of professional educators, technology designers, graduate students,

and faculty who share common interests and curiosities. And why *Semantic*? While individual cards feature words or phrases (i.e. “Mashup,” “Through the Looking Glass”), it is via players’ collective and discursive moves that an underlying logic is produced as a meaning-making experience.

Methodology and Representation

Our team approaches this representation of inquiry with methods similar to those utilized when developing POST Cards. We employ a design-based process (Design-based Research Collective, 2003; Edelson, 2002) driven by theory (about conceptions of play, i.e. Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Sicart, 2014), intended to improve education practice (i.e. professional learning), and iteratively co-created with participants. Within this research tradition, we draw upon design narrative methods which foreground “important agents, events, causes, and results” (Bell *et al.*, 2004). Our design narrative, as an experimental form of multimodal literacy (Jacobs, 2007), attends to these characteristics by accepting Barab and colleagues’ (2009) invitation to produce “worked examples.” Such scholarship – annotated, distributed, and dialogical – has the potential to transform conventional academic publishing; the approach affords “emancipatory potential in that it liberates academic publishing from the fossilizing medium of printed text” (p. 3). With the intention to provoke discussion about the content and configuration of our inquiry, we trace the literal and figurative tradeoffs associated with the development and play of POST Cards.

In addition to this contextual framing, our opening commentary introduces elements of composition. The following page features four purposefully arranged figures. Figure 1, in the upper left, is a representative card (“Bricolage”) from the first POST Cards iteration. The card features multiple spaces to write players’ names and interpretative explanations during successive trades, as well as the (now defunct) geometrically sequenced points structure. To the right is Figure 2, “The Punch Line” from the second iteration, with a larger area to explain interpretations, and the addition of the trading player’s contact information. The lower left, Figure 3, demonstrates how second iteration POST Cards have become incorporated into a novel activity structure – the planning and grouping of unconference activities (Budd *et al.*, 2015) at our professional learning events. In this instance, the many POST Cards indicate who among conference attendees plans to attend the crowdsourced and participant-facilitated session on “nurturing local culture.” And in the lower right, Figure 4 showcases an unconference session “outcome sheet” that borrows from the basic POST Card design. Figure 4 illustrates how this larger sheet functions as a canvas for shared posting via collaboratively authored notes and questions related to a session about “Creating global culture with different habits.”

In playing with(in) the conventions of a manuscript’s structure, we create visual compositions to convey the give-and-take trading of ideas, the turn-based correspondence characteristics of play, and the sequential development of discourse across time. For example, the four figures – as panels on the subsequent page – establish a democratic grid (Brunetti, 2011), or a page layout featuring panels of equal size commonly used when drawing comics (McCloud, 1993). In some instances we have chosen to use POST Cards as a template to literally frame text or an image. We have also experimented with varied panel arrangements when incorporating media and other narrative elements. Like a game of POST Cards, we present multiple interpretations of how the “worked example represents a functional analog to the technology that it entails and serves to explicate; that is, the worked example exhibits media snippets, snapshots of engagement with those media, and spaces of reflection, conjecture, and commentary around that engagement” (Barab *et al.*, 2009, p. 18). With the intention to provoke discussion about the content and configuration of our inquiry, we have constructed an annotated narrative in the form and spirit of the cards themselves, tracing our thinking as the activity evolved over time. We present this narrative in the following section.

Bricolage

Name: Explanation:	16
Name: Explanation:	8
Name: Explanation:	4
Name: Explanation:	2
Name: Explanation:	1

Figure 1. Example POST Card from first iteration

The Punch Line

Name:
 Contact:

Figure 2. Example POST Card from second iteration

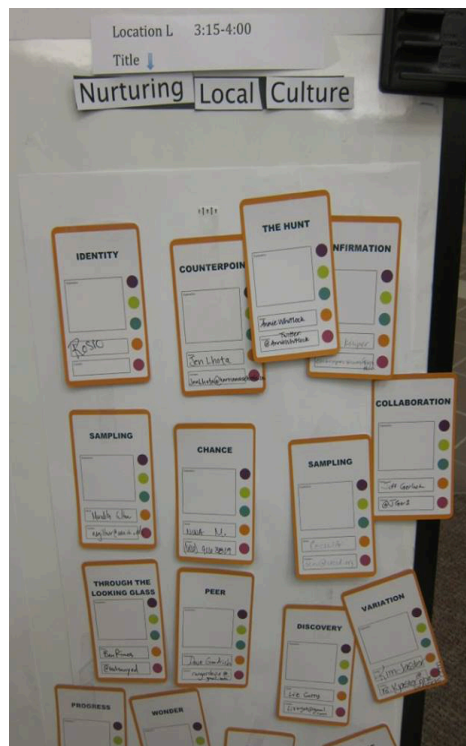


Figure 3. Planning unconference session with POST Cards

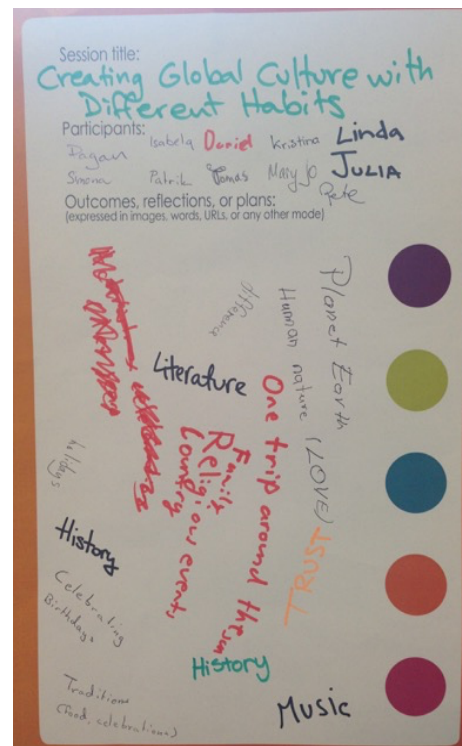


Figure 4. Unconference outcome sheet modeled after a POST Card

Shuffling: An Annotated Narrative in POST Cards

Concept Maps



Pagan
August, 2012
Geneva, Switzerland

Sampling

2 Versions:
Competitive (2012);
Non-competitive (2013)

3 Continents:
Geneva, Switzerland
(Summer 2012); Ann Arbor,
Michigan (Summer 2013,
2014, 2015); Prague, Czech
Republic (Fall, 2014)

3 Purposes:
Project development
(Summer 2012); Social
networking (Summer 2013);
Unconferencing (Summer
2014, 2015)

1 Mutation:
Quote cards

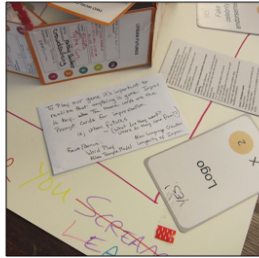
Remi
2012-2015
Our Pale Blue Dot



Notes: “Deckled: The Game of Rough Ideas” was our first attempt at the game’s name. This name emerged from initial conversations about the importance of each team creating a concept map as one tangible outcome of play. Our continued discussion about this name led us to consider the idea of a post – an object that marks a given place as a sign, like a pole or cairn. During play – we imagined – players would post cards on a wall, perhaps after or atop other cards, an act indicating how ideas emerge and develop, how an individual’s physical marks become collective remarks. Our attachment to concept maps came from this “posting” or “marking” of conceptual and literal space. The goal of our game design was for players to work together and use their posts to create a map of common curiosities. We imagined the concept map becoming an object of discussion, with players’ posting of common curiosities the focus of concept mapping.

Keeping Score

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but wow, it really didn't turn out the way we expected.

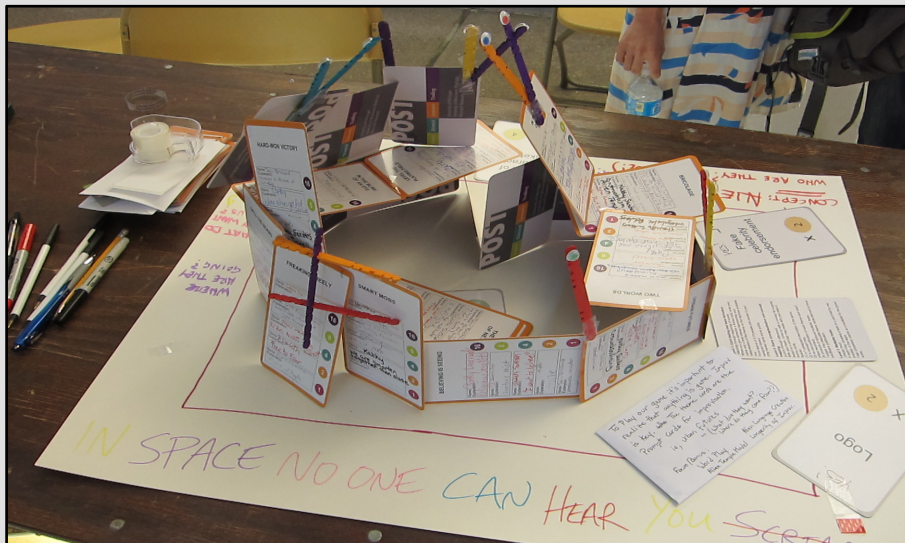


Jeff
June, 2012
Madison, Wisconsin

Layered

Due to the material affordances of trading cards, it is possible to shuffle, cut, and even stack a deck. It is also possible to construct intricately arranged and carefully balanced card houses. In these configurations, and others, cards are both purposefully and haphazardly layered, a deck's sum determined by - and also larger than - its individual values. The complexity of a given deck reflects layered numeric and symbolic values. Through POST Cards play, discourse moves help shuffle, turn over, and reveal the layered values that people bring to new conversations and collaborations.

Remi
September, 2012
Madison, Wisconsin



Notes: For the first POST Cards pilot at the GLS Conference, we came up with an elaborate scoring system, in which points and multipliers were given for different tasks and depending on how many times a card was traded. Only cards that could be logically included in a concept map at the end could be counted. Attendees were supposed to form teams organically and compete against each other. We had a large and unwieldy spreadsheet to calculate points. There were prizes. Despite the daunting instructions, we had great expectations. It turned out, though, that the attendees, most of whom had only just met each other, weren't particularly interested in competing. For a while, it looked like no one would chart even one point. Finally, though, as evening approached a couple of gregarious souls decided they wanted to win, and that the best way to win was to form one giant team and pool resources. The concept map became an elaborate 3D structure. It was a one-team game. They accumulated several million points.

Participation

Reflecting upon the design and implementation of our first iteration in Madison and then Geneva, it appeared as though players wanted to participate in the ritual of winning, whether or not there was any competition from other teams.



Pagan
May, 2013
British Columbia, Canada

Value

There's something special about the act of trading cards, which makes it such an appealing activity for kids, and adults, too. And the trade almost never happens without some sort of conversation, which for our aims is crucial. The value of a card is the value that we agree upon, or argue for, and by extension trading cards can be a way to start conversations about what we value.



Jeff
June, 2013
Ann Arbor, Michigan



Notes: In 2013 we decided that what people liked most about POST Cards was trading and talking about them, so we ditched scoring and created a “*Hippie-dippy non-competitive version.*” The stated goal was: “To collect a set of POST Cards that are meaningful to you, in that they signify guiding principles in your work, help set a course or direction, or otherwise help you remember something important.”

Here are some of the instructions:

- You may trade cards any way you wish, but before you give a card to someone else, be sure to have a conversation about it. You might start the conversation by saying something like, “When I see that word I think of...” or “What does this word mean to you?”
- When you have decided to give your card to someone, write your name and a meaningful comment in the box on the card before you hand it over. For example, you might write, “To me this means...,” “I’m giving this to you because...,” or “This made me think of you because...” Then give it to your (possibly new) friend with an appropriate sense of ceremony.

Provocation

At conferences, people tend to focus on their established interests. Which is fine, but how do we get people to go beyond what they already find interesting, to go in new directions? The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education uses small objects, or sets of objects, called "provocations" in order to inspire a child's curiosity and inquiry. We think of POST Cards and Quote Cards as provocations. When gathering to play, it was important for us that players do not get to choose their own card. The elements of randomness, trading, and discovery are important.

Remi
November, 2013
Durban, South Africa

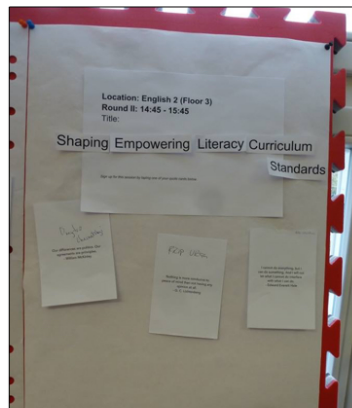
Quote

Let's unconference. Create session titles collaboratively with others, combining the magnetic words. Then, find a session you are interested in attending, and think about how your quote card could relate to the topic. Write your name on this quote card and post it under the title of that session. This posted card functions as your ticket to then participate in the session.



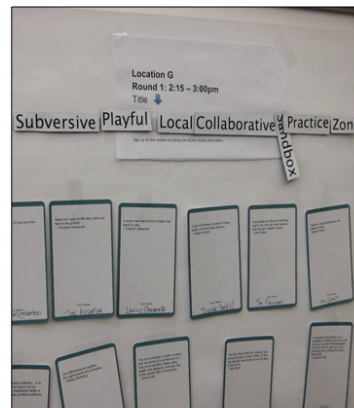
Jeff
November, 2014
Prague, Czech Republic

Prototype



Quote Card Prototype
November, 2014
Prague, Czech Republic

Unconference



Quote Card Unconference
June, 2015
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Notes: The impetus for Quote Cards, a POST Cards mutation, came from a desire to provide global participation opportunities within our Prague unconference. Prior to the gathering, we invited Institute for Innovation in Education members from around the world to submit quotes that would then appear on cards. For example, our South African colleague Thengani Ngwenya wrote, "In this wide world there's nothing else besides your consciousness." Quote Cards, we presumed, could inspire session creation (i.e. an unconference topic) and assist participants in "posting" their intent to join and contribute to a given session.

Outcomes

Whether in the first iteration, in which players created artifacts and earned points, or in the second that simulated varied microcosms of collaboration, our designs accomplished a similar set of outcomes: social networking among strangers; co-created group norms for shared inquiry; and lessons about the co-constructed and generative nature of play. Outcomes, for better or worse, reflected the contingent and contextual.

Pagan
June, 2015
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Metaphor

Reflecting on POST Cards play, I recall Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*, the central idea being that our words and thinking - even those ideas we think of as very abstract - are based in experience with the physical world. POST Cards literally flips that idea on its head. It made our words something very physical, not just on a page or screen, but on something that we layered, shuffled, traded, and stuck to the wall.

Remi
September, 2015
Denver, Colorado

Embodiment

POST Cards disrupts the idea that knowledge is an individual quality contained within a person's head. People learning something new often comment upon "wrapping my head around it," or "keeping it in mind." The play of POST Cards, however, is created through a material and embodied way of knowing, as player's write, shake hands, trade, post, circulate, and converse. Accordingly, the participation and learning that occurs through POST Cards is a mutual trait shared among - and created by - many people as players.

Jeff
September, 2015
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Identity

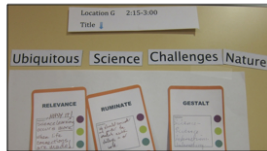
Like a video game avatar, it is important that players are encouraged to alter game "pieces" so that they reflect individual identity. One lesson we've learned from POST Cards is the importance of people identifying with the cards they trade and post. This past summer, at our June, 2015 conference, someone showed me a POST Card they had received and held for two years! Sharing this card did more than request a (re)introduction to the other player; it was an invitation to identify with a common professional interest.

Pagan
September, 2015
British Columbia, Canada

Notes: When POST Cards was only an idea, a mentor of ours remarked: "Do an experiment with the word 'post' by asking people to say the first thing that comes to mind when you say the word 'post;'" you get some surprising results. Lamp post, fence post, post office, post box, postwar, etc. It turns out that the word has many interesting and contradictory meanings." Contradictory meanings have persisted across iterations as an outcome from so many rounds of play. Consider that the turns in a game represent more than successively ordered exchanges. Rather, literal turns of phrase (re)orient pathways of embodiment and expressions of identity.

Symmetries

Among many possible symmetries, the iterations of POST Cards play, our design-based inquiry as a “worked example” (Barab et al., 2009), and this particular and playful multimodal creation all collectively represent “an alternative mode of discourse... reflecting a participatory and interpretivist stance” (p. 18).



Remi/Pagan/Jeff
Now
Somewhere amongst us all

The Future



Where and when would you like to
POST Cards?

Coda

What have we learned from the development and play of POST Cards? As a complement to our annotated narrative, we conclude with three brief remarks. The following design principles, we assert, are relevant to fostering greater playfulness in higher education. First, we have learned to embrace the inevitability of tradeoffs. From cards posted, to ideas traded, to designs abandoned, we appreciate that what may initially appear as a compromise is, more often than not, a necessarily bit of creative destruction. Second, it is important that players be invited to “put their stamp” on the game. While, ostensibly, POST Cards serves as an opportunity to play a game, it is as frequently the next occasion to “game” – or keenly tweak – a co-authored design. The evolution of POST Cards is the result of an ongoing give-and-take, with words, quotes, artifacts, and (broken) rules traded in pursuit of some meaningful yet contingent logic. And finally, POST Cards can create conditions whereby an everyday ritual and social practice (i.e. participating in an academic conference) is transformed into a playground of improvisational and discursive play. Like the experimental form of this article, the conventions of networking and professional learning can be rendered anew. We now know that a handshake and the business of trading cards can become, quite literally, remarkable.

Acknowledgements

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