

Please cite the Published Version

Shields, Emily (2019) Running a playful event. In: Playful Learning: Events and Activities to Engage Adults. Routledge. ISBN 9781138496446

Publisher: Routledge

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/629016/>

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact rsi@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Chapter 7

Running a playful event

Emily Shields

This chapter draws on the day-to-day practice of running and managing playful events. It considers the different ways in which playfulness can be embedded into your event, and also those times where play is not appropriate. The planning of any specific event starts a long time before the day itself and the individuals involved and approach taken during this process will be crucial to its success. This chapter focuses on playfulness during the planning stage, and how that can then be implemented at the event itself.

Introduction

Managing playfulness, or playful people, during an event can be a challenge. Dimming enthusiasm, suspending a 'sense of disbelief' or breaking the game's 'magic circle' could quite easily ruin a delegate's experience of the event or – in extreme cases – the event itself. However, there are times when information needs to be given, decisions need to be made and speakers have to present; not in itself a non-playful experience, but one that needs to be controlled by the speaker. Managing these practicalities sometimes requires a non-playful, purely practical approach that needs to be handled carefully in order not to disturb the overall sense of playfulness.

The ethos of playfulness can also be used during the planning process: a good way to ensure that the event itself is infused with a playful attitude. Managing such preparations through a conference team or committee requires a level of practicality while allowing team members to immerse themselves within a playful environment. Creating a game-like space within which ideas can be fostered, and just as often discarded, is an important part of the planning process. Understanding how to create a 'magic circle', a place where certain game rules are accepted by the players (Huizinga, 1955) in which playfulness and practicalities form the rule-set is crucial to an effective planning process.

All events will have boundaries and constraints that are beyond your control: the physical environment, the number of delegates, organisational expectations, and budgets. However, as Bogost (2016) states this is not necessarily a bad thing as too much choice can hinder a playful attitude as much as too little. Having boundaries set for us to work within gives the planning team a defined space in which to play. He also suggests that *everything* can be treated as play, and while this approach may be difficult to apply for those setting out on this process and facing the organisational behemoth of planning and organising an event, it is an admirable aim.

The benefit of being playful in both planning and implementation is that no one can predict what will unfold, and the learning and development goals that can be attained are unlimited. A playful event sets parameters, gives a space in which normal rules are mutable and lets the players take themselves on unexpected journeys. As organisers this can be a challenge to manage while keeping the event running as planned, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Case Study 16: Social Media All-Stars Card Game (Liz Cable)

This card game was created for a conference involving coached cohorts of small business owners. It aimed to teach the principles of social media in a way that would provoke discussion and swapping

of personal experiences, and was designed to reward prioritising time taken for training, strategy and review over action.

The aim of the game is to get the most Sales, which was made easier by growing your online Influence. It assumes each business owner can spare 60 minutes over the course of each week to deal with social media, which equates to taking one Action card, or two of any other cards (Strategy, Training, and Review) each turn. These cards then affect Sales and Influence. If Influence is awarded, then dice are rolled to increase influence, representing *liking*, *sharing*, *following* and *viral* – to show the somewhat random nature of social media. The advice on the cards was subsequently written up as an action plan and widely circulated.

The trainees really liked the STAR (Strategy, Training, Action, Review) model, and the advice on the cards, but the mechanics of the game did not work as it was played on the day, although it did spark the discussion around Influence and its effect on Sales, which was the original intent. A last minute request to let the coaches have a 'special role' in their business support group, meant instead of playing along, they were choosing each turn how many dice of their own to roll to add to each players roll depending on how good they thought the idea was, which imbalanced the game mechanics. The lesson is to never change the rules without playtesting the consequences first.

Pre-event planning

No matter how large the event planning team is, the same principles should apply. As with every successful team it is good to have a range of people and skills, which would mean that not every committee member will be brimming with ideas of playful activity, indeed someone with a constructively critical attitude can be a bonus to any team. Ideas are needed, but someone with the pragmatic skills to make those ideas a reality is also necessary, and this is not always the same person. In terms of practical skills for a successful planning team it is useful to have those with skills sets including event management, financial acumen, design skills and for a large event it will be important to get on board a representative from the venue to advise you (for more information on organisational planning see Chapter 3).

Alongside any skillset individual members bring, what all team members also need is to embrace a playful attitude; if the team members do not value it then the likelihood of delegates at the event engaging is reduced. However, you are not always in a position to choose the people who you will be organising the event with and it may be an uphill battle to get the wider team to encompass a playful ethos. Getting committee members on board with your ideas to create a playful event (or to integrate playful elements to an existing event) is an important step and the first one to tackle at the pre-planning stage. It may be that you need to make a case for playfulness and to coach your team members in the ethos. An understanding of how the committee, as well as delegates at the event, can benefit from a more creative and less constrained approach will be an important scene-setter early on.

Some conferences, like Playful Learning and Counterplay, are specific in that play is at the very heart of what they do, and the planning team and delegates are like-minded individuals who need no introduction to the power of play. However, most events are not quite so play-centric and it is useful to decide at an early stage what level of playfulness you are aiming for. The fully-integrated playful conference is at one end of the spectrum, while most other events will have elements of playfulness combined with a more traditional approach. The planning for these latter events may differ slightly, with a 'playful' team member charged with running particular aspects in an otherwise traditional event.

Making the planning process more playful and encouraging a playful attitude among the committee can take a number of small steps:

- Play a game at the start to free up ideas and get into a playful state of mind. An ‘icebreaker’ activity is a good way to get the team playing, having fun and getting to know each other: see Case Studies 10 and 17 for examples.
- Try to make mundane aspects of the meeting fun. Offer chocolate rewards to those who take on actions; ask attendees to bring along something that represents their attitude to play to get the ball rolling; bring dice along to randomise the agenda; have at least one agenda item that is creative and encourages discussion.
- Get ideas on paper. You are more likely to find a good idea in the midst of thirty ideas than in one or two. Rapid idea generation is a tool used in many creative design approaches: a playful version could include something like ‘six-eight-five’ where people are given five minutes and eight post-its to list six to eight ideas. Sharing and discussing these in turns leads to far-reaching yet useful ideas. Even the silliest ideas can turn out to have practical applications: a pirate-themed treasure map can turn into a playful venue map.

At the planning stage it is important to understand who your delegates are, and their likely objectives, in order to create playful experiences that they are more likely to engage in (see Chapter 4). Exploring why you are employing playful approaches and what your attendees will achieve from this is important in ensuring that you understand what it is you are offering. Do you want activities that will enhance the event and are entwined throughout (see Chapter 10) or are you looking for activities that will sit separately and run parallel to it? Can you be flexible enough to allow your delegates to define the playfulness levels if you are unsure of how immersed they will be in the process (see Case Study 8). No matter how big your event, there will be times when you also need to interface with more formal elements of an organisation or environment: estates, finance departments, HR, catering, and those whose everyday working space is being entered. Often playfulness can be embraced by willing participants, such as the Playful Learning catering staff who were willing to dress as pirates; or delegates from another conference joining in open activities or social media games. However, this is not always the case, and you will need to be mindful of the needs of others outside of the event but sharing the space or online platform.

[INSERT FIGURE 7.1 HERE]

Figure 7.1: Catering staff getting in the prate mood at Playful Learning 2018

The pre-event planning should also include discussion on how best to ‘warm up’ your delegates. Not everyone will happily throw themselves into a playful situation if they do not know to expect it. While you do not need to detail the exact activities that will be happening, if you want your delegates to be open to games and play then you need to plan ahead for this and set the tone accordingly. As Sicart (2014) suggests, if you want individuals to know that this particular context is a context for play then you need to embed cues and signal that your event is open to playfulness. You can embed such cues throughout the planning process. For instance, if your correspondence is fairly serious and academic then there will be a disconnect on arrival if you present people with an obvious playful environment. You can indicate early on that play is encouraged by utilising official channels such as emails, the call for papers and the website to embed playfulness before arrival. If you are planning activities that require some preparation by your delegates be clear about this and send out information beforehand. People can always choose to opt out, but not being able to engage because you had not brought the right tools or known what to expect can act as a form of exclusion.

At this stage a decision should be made regarding how play will integrate into your event as there are options for all levels of playfulness. Are you looking to create an entirely playful event with an over-arching game (see Chapter 10) or a theme that is complemented throughout with optional games, play and activities for attendees to engage in? Will the games consist of a series of smaller, stand-alone events that still instil an ethos of playfulness but are less time-intensive for the organisers to prepare? Individual games like this could be run throughout the event or alternatively you could pick times that would work within your programme, such as an evening event or over a lunch break. If you do not feel ready to plan and run an event-specific game you could encourage free-play where the delegates themselves create the play. Utilising creative elements such as Lego, Plasticine, art materials, dice, etc. organisers can foster delegates' playfulness. Beware though, this is not the easy option! While the materials may be available, the environment and context still need to say 'play' in order for your attendees to have the attitude you want to encourage, and setting those cues about the environment you want to create needs careful planning. Also bear in mind that if there's incongruence between the event's formal sessions and the planned activities you may find less playful engagement than you anticipated

Top tips at the planning stage:

1. Create a safe, playful space for the event committee: where all ideas are valued.
2. Engage with your event-planning colleagues and any related staff (security, catering, tech, volunteers etc.) early in the process, and share the playful ethos with them (e.g. value their ideas too).
3. Understand the delegates and their expectations and likely engagement with play.
4. Know what you want to achieve and how integrated play will be in the overall event.
5. Plan to set the tone early on and let your delegates, presenters and exhibitors know in advance if there are activities that they may want to engage in or prepare for.
6. Test any games you want to play at the event itself.

When is play not appropriate?

A playful environment is not suitable for every event. While formal academic or industry events should not automatically exclude play, there may well be some research topics where playfulness embedded, or even running parallel to the subject matter would not feel acceptable. Likewise, even in the most playful event there are still important activities and outcomes at the core of the event. As organisers it would be disrespectful to run noisy, disruptive games alongside sessions where presenters are trying to promote thinking, reflection or to keep the attention of their audience. In all of these situations, playfulness might offer cues for the way the event is run (such as creating a safe space, open idea forums, embracing failure, etc.), rather than overt games.

There may be occasions during the event where you intersect with others using the same space: interactions that also need respecting. If you are using academic or business premises you are usually in a mixed working environment and while most people are accepting of some levels of disruption in such large shared spaces, taking this too far may incur the frustrations, and potential complaints, of those around you. Having to bring games and play to a close prematurely due to the annoyance of those around is a quick way to dissipate any playful environment you may have fostered. On the other hand, engaging positively with those not directly involved in the game can bring extra elements and encourage play amongst more reluctant non-playing delegates. Counterplay takes place in a public library, and many of the workshops or playful objects are available for the general public to access: play there is an open invitation.

There are other times when trying to engage with Bogost's (2016) view that 'everything' can be made playful may well end up in a swift termination of your event booking. Organising a conga to evacuate in the event of a fire alarm would never be a good idea. Being playful around anything concerning budgets and finances is also not to be encouraged.

Case Study 17: Curate-A-Fact (Alex Moseley)

This card-based collaborative game was used as a quick networking activity with around fifty people during the first coffee break at a Museums symposium in Belfast. The brief was to run a game to fit into fifteen minutes, over a coffee break that would introduce people to each other, and get them thinking creatively.

Cards were created to represent fifty museum artefacts, using open source images from museum collections (e.g. Science Museum, British Museum) and each card colour-coded in one of five colours. Attendees were each given a card at registration. After collecting their coffee, they were asked to join together with four or five other people to curate a small themed exhibition using their combined artefacts. None of the cards could be of the same colour, to avoid easy connections (e.g. two Roman artefacts, or two lamps).

After ten minutes, each group was asked to pitch their exhibition to everyone else in thirty seconds. Once all groups had presented their ideas, everyone used their card as a voting chip, and placed it next to the group whose idea they most liked. The winning group was the one with the most votes.

The activity worked extremely well, resulting in some very creative ideas. The same activity was then used at a major Museums conference in London, with 200 attendees. This time, teams were formed over lunch, and were given posters on which to stick their cards and describe their collection: these formed a gallery, and everyone received a sticker to vote on their favourite idea.

[INSERT FIGURE 7.2 HERE]

Figure 7.2: Curate-A-Fact cards

The playful event

The planning stage is crucial in ensuring that the right playful environment can be created at the event itself. Underpinning any playful 'chaos' should be a well-managed environment. This environment can be flexible, both in terms of the space itself or the ethos, allowing delegates to build upon any activities you have planned, but the foundations of the playful activities, and the tools to enable these, should already be in place for delegates to engage with.

At the event itself everyone, committee members, helpers, delegates and sponsors or exhibitors, should know what to expect; expectations that should have been established in pre-event communications. However, there will always be things that do not quite go as predicted and during your pre-conference preparation you will have thought through many such 'what ifs...'. When planning for the unexpected bear in mind that the issues listed below are not particularly uncommon: most of these situations are likely to happen at some point during your playful event career. It is the unique, specific and truly random that can make for difficult situations.

Setting the tone at the event is just as important as managing expectations with pre-event communications. First impressions count, and encouraging attendees to enter the game space /playful environment from the outset encourages subsequent behaviours from your delegates. If it is an event where attendees have to register, a positive registration experience will be key to first interactions and, if you have control over your environment, the space that attendees walk into can

also be used creatively. As Sicart (2014) suggests “good playgrounds open themselves up to play, and their props serve as instruments for playful occupations” (p55); playgrounds are not limited to children but creating a play space for your attendees with playful props, signage, costumes and attitude can inspire play in even the most hesitant delegate.

Registration at an event is the place where your delegates should be feeling excited, refreshed and ready to engage with the event ahead of them. It is the perfect opportunity to set the tone and encourage a playful attitude. Covering the basics is important here and you should ensure the registration desk is staffed by kindred souls who are fully committed to the playful ethos you are creating. The registration area is the focus for most delegate questions throughout any event and having well-briefed helpers, enthusiastic about the activities planned, is vital in order to encourage delegates to enthuse in turn. As a focus, the registration area can be a station for the more static fun that you may be trying to encourage, perhaps a creative table for delegates to take some time out from the more formal learning. It is worth noting though that having a table with colouring and creative ‘bits and bobs’ on does not in itself make an event playful, but such a table can add to a wider playful atmosphere.

Unprepared delegates

If you have an activity that requires some preparation on behalf of the delegate offer time, props or support at the conference itself to allow them to join the game later. For example, having a masked ball as the conference dinner is fine, but it would be wise to have some spare masks. Playful Learning 2017 proposed that delegates’ toys could have their own parallel conference, where delegates brought toys along that acted as alter-egos both online and at the conference itself (Jones & Shields, 2018). Many attendees embraced this and brought toys along with them, but those who came without toys could choose their own from a selection the organisers had purchased from a charity shop (see Case Study 11).

Non-engagement (individual)

As a playful organiser it can be hard to accept but non-engagement shouldn’t be perceived as a negative unless a delegate feels excluded through organisational issues rather than their own decision. Carse (1986) noted that “whoever must play, cannot play” (p4): play cannot be forced, and so every activity should have a get-out, and one that doesn’t make it difficult for someone to say ‘no’. If you are trying an activity that requires all delegates at an event to engage you need to ensure you have an opt-out clause that doesn’t mean delegates are missing out on any of the event’s main learning objectives. Not every activity will suit every delegate and even the most playful among us have games we do not want to join in with. Not joining in with the activity itself does not mean someone is not enjoying it or getting something out of it.

Organisers need to ensure that non-engagement is not the result of bad planning on their part. If you have planned a multi-day event where attendees may come on one day only you need to consider how the individuals attending on days two, three etc. will join in what could be a well-established game space. Exclusion to a game is different to choosing not to engage, and ensuring that you prepare those joining a game later than others ensures that they can gain frustration-free entry into the game. Planning an approach in advance for day or late delegates is therefore vital.

Non-engagement (cohort)

Regardless of how permeated by playful activities the event is, when there is little engagement this can be harder to deal with at the time and will need careful consideration at the post-event debrief. It may be that there has been a disconnect between the planners’ assumptions of their delegates’ playfulness and the actuality, or that the activities themselves just were not quite right or had been

inadequately explained. Whatever the reasons this is where the pre-event planning and the ability to be flexible come into its own, as well as a little gentle persuasion from the organisers. If things are not working as you expect you could try some insider tactics, enlisting the event helpers as well as delegates known to the organisers, to be more proactive in playing and to encourage those around them. If there is a competitive element to the games, strategically planned encouragement of a team ethos can be useful. At events where items (e.g. stars, stickers, coins) are collected to establish a winner organisers may start handing these out more freely to get the ball rolling or to encourage a closer competition.

Over-engagement

While playful design may permeate the event's content, at the opposite end of the spectrum you may find over-engagement with play problematic. All events have a timetable, the flexibility of which should be known to the organisers, however over-engagement of delegates may cause some games to take too long and impact upon the timings for the rest of the conference. The Counterplay conference in 2018 arranged for a band to be part of one morning's activities. The delegates were enjoying this so much that the organisers changed the timetable for the day to allow an extended concert/dance. This level of flexibility is more likely to be possible in a playful environment, and one where the organisers and other presenters are fully aware of the potential for this to happen, and the delegates are also happy to respond so positively to an unexpected turn of events. In an event where play is taking longer than expected gauging the delegate response to cutting short play may be harder to judge, but most attendees are there to engage primarily with content even if they are engaging in play, and managing the need for both is usually accepted.

As with any activity and group of people, you might find that particular individuals or small groups are beginning to spoil the event experience for others (either in or outside of the event). Having an organiser or helper who is looking out for this, and is able to reign in the antisocial activity in an appropriate way (maybe by using the game parameters to restrict or refocus activity) to guard against this. If that fails to work, the early engagement with security staff (as discussed above) will ensure you can work with them to solve the problem appropriately.

Case Study 18: Mapping A Story (Liz Cable)

Mapping A Story was created as part of a course on creative writing for the web. ActionBound is an online tool to build location-based games (like scavenger hunts), which can then be played on mobile phones. It allows players to submit different types of media in response to questions: text, photos, audio, and answers to multiple choice questions. There is a free version as well as an educational license.

The game was designed partly as a group-building exercise, to familiarise players with the location of the event, and partly to introduce different styles of location-based narratives and practice collaborative writing using digital tools. Many of the players did not know each other, and the teams were put together randomly. No prizes were offered, and the time limit of 45 minutes was simply to get the groups back together at the end to present and share what they had created rather than being integral to the design of the game.

Mapping A Story was very simple, consisting of around ten tasks. After a short introduction, players were sent off in teams of four or five to complete these. The tasks included orientation questions, but also introduced a few key concepts and began the process of getting the teams to collaborate on creative work. For example, one challenge asked for an interpretation of a creative brief: take three pictures depicting friendship, perseverance and courage. There was also a short psychogeography

walk based on random encounters and a re-interpretation of how to give directions, ending with an instruction to walk to the nearest window, and write a haiku about what the group saw.

There were no right or wrong responses to the creative tasks. Experimentation and creative interpretation was encouraged and rewarded in discussion. Even if groups felt they had failed on a task, the presentation at the end demonstrated and celebrated the wildly different responses. The groups had each written their haiku about a different view from a different window. There was no failure, only different interpretations.

Conclusion

There are many ways to infuse an event with playfulness. Options ranging from a full-blown, multi-day conference with a theme and structured game throughout, through to an afternoon event with a few playful interludes and a table of Lego, means that there are choices available for all organisers. Play can enhance any event if planned in a considered way; successful playful events do not usually just happen, they are carefully orchestrated behind the scenes to give an environment and structure in which everyone can choose to play, spectate or create.

Careful orchestration starts with the planning: without this all aspects of an event are more likely to fail. Play can look unstructured or even disordered but behind any event activity is hours' worth of organisation and testing so that the execution can go smoothly, and any issues can be dealt with quickly and effectively. To enable this, planning needs to consider and include all parties involved in the event – from the delegates to the catering staff – and all stages and activities from pre-arrival through to the event end.

If this planning is conducted playfully, it can also bring an open-ness, inclusiveness and creative aspect to the event design. A playful committee is more likely to produce new creative ideas and solutions to many of the common event activities, problems and issues, creating a better experience overall for the delegates.

Finally, remember to expect the unexpected. The beauty of play is that you do not always know where it is going to take you. As organisers, deviation from the plan can be stressful, but if you have prepared what you can and you have thought through contingency strategies then the rest should take care of itself. If you get really stuck then play is always there to help you think of creative solutions to any organisational problems that may arise.

References

- Bogost, I. (2016). *Play anything: the pleasure of limits, the uses of boredom, and the secret of games*. New York: Basic Books.
- Carse, J. P. (1986). *Finite and Infinite games: A vision of life as play and possibilities*. New York: Ballantine.
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Jones, R., & Shields, E. (2018). Using games to disrupt the conference Twittersphere, *26*(1063519), 1–10.
- Sicart, M. (2014). *Play matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.