

An Interview with Dr. Tori Mondelli

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For the special section titled “History Fun and Games” in the fall 2023 issue *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, I’m delighted to include my recorded interview with Dr. Tori Mondelli.

Dr. Mondelli serves as the Founding Director of the University of Missouri’s Teaching for Learning Center. She is also a faculty member in the College of Education & Human Development and the College of Arts and Science. She holds a Ph.D. in early modern European history. Her training as a historian led her to prize writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines pedagogies. From there, she became an expert in coaching faculty and other educators to incorporate the full gamut of evidence-based and creative practices to maximize student engagement and deepen learning. Her passion for game-based learning was ignited while at the City University of New York and led her to facilitate workshops nationally, often with her co-author, Dr. Joe Bisz. Their collaborative, highly interactive pedagogy was in need of a scholarly design method to leverage research-based principles known to improve learning. After years of research and praxis, their book *The Educator’s Guide to Designing Games and Creative Active-Learning Exercises: The Allure of Play* was published in 2023 by Columbia University Teacher’s College Press.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Welcome and thank you very much for being here. Tell us about your new book, *The Educator’s Guide to Designing Games and Creative Active-Learning Exercises*.

Tori Mondelli: Thank you for inviting me, Jessamyn, and I’m so happy to talk about this topic for your special issue “History Fun and Games.” As we talk, you reference[d] the book by its correct title, but I’m so accustomed to referring to it by its subtitle, I’ll probably say *The Allure of Play* a bunch of times because I love the word “allure.” And, it’s an acronym for our six step method to guide readers in the design process, and we always thought that would be the title of the book.

So, *The Allure of Play* offers a step by step, guide for professors, graduate instructors, all educators without any previous game design background. The idea is, we want all educators to feel confident and competent to know that they can create something purposeful and fun, using the ALLURE spectrum, which is what we describe as being anything from light, playful activities right on up to deeply immersive serious games for any and all history courses--all levels of learners, undergrads and grad students.

Besides being a design guide this book is our views, in general, for more play in the classroom as a much needed active learning pedagogy, you know, moving into the twenty-first century with learners who want more than just lectures and discussions. So readers will see that we are great proponents of game based learning and really point to it as a very compelling subset of active learning that at its core has problem solving, co-creation of content and meaning, and feedback for students players. And those are all elements that we know adult learners crave for meaningful, educational, and I’ll say, workplace experiences.

In the book, we also wanted to showcase some examples of learning games from a diverse group of colleagues across the disciplines, and to show how we can infuse a good measure of fun even for heavy duty learning outcomes. And, fellow historians, rejoice if this is a topic that interests you: we created a hypothetical historian/faculty member named Jackie who goes through our ALLURE process step by step, and she does a lot of thinking aloud on many of her design moves, so I just want to throw that in there for this group.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: That really sounds like a must read for so many reasons! You hold a masters and doctorate degree in modern and early modern European history. In what ways do you think your background in history informed your interest and research in using games and other creative activities in the classroom?

Tori Mondelli: I can literally only point to one playful and creative activity that I experienced as part of my own work in history: our history of science professor asked us to each write a letter to a would-be Renaissance patron to fund our research, or our art artwork or creative projects. This role playing opportunity combined writing, and for me, it was hands down the most fun I had in my entire doctoral program. So while I can't say that my background in history, my preparation, led me to my obsession with game based learning, I did have that one direct experience, and it was, you know, *fantastical*. It required me to use my imagination in nontraditional ways. So that that was pretty cool.

I would have to wait several years until I would meet my coauthor and other faculty members from City University, of New York, before the fire would really get lit. The fuel came from the English department at the community college where I was working. It was fascinating what they were doing. Many of them were teaching English composition at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, and they got the sense themselves as teachers that the students found courses dry and boring. It was mostly grammar, and the students were crumbling--and it was wearing down the faculty. They determined that they were going to make their classes the best classes. By using their own creativity and engagement tactics, and working collaboratively and really sharing and supporting each other, these courses became some of the students' favorite classes.

As it turned out, this group of people, many of them had grown up on things like *Dungeons and Dragons*, and were just playing a lot of games on their own anyway, and they brought that knowledge to the learning environment. So when I started observing and seeing this transformation of the student experience, and the learning process was so positive I became invested very quickly. In time I found it easy to extend these ideas and tactics to other disciplines, especially history.

Retrospectively with history, I can say that there are aspects of history that are just a natural fit for game based learning. And now it's different for me, because I have the conceptual language of simple and complex game mechanics, that framework, and that that's what our book teaches.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: I love that story about the English Department, and especially how they could acknowledge [that the class was], to use the "B word," boring. Getting over themselves a little bit to say, "Hey, this content might be boring!" Just straight up admitting that, and not going to where a lot of professors tend to go [saying] "Well, that's too bad. Students have to do it." Instead, they just leaned into it saying "So, how can we make it more engaging, more interesting, less boring?"

So thinking about history again, and like you said, there is some real natural overlap in history. What specific history skills and abilities could a gamification approach to studying the past help students build?

Tori Mondelli: Thanks for that great question. I definitely have some specific recommendations, but if you'll let me, I'd like to maybe think about it a little more generally. First, because I really think that that the power of the ALLURE method is in that sequencing of steps and for faculty to design playful gameful experiences.

Working in the space of faculty development for over a decade, I always want faculty to apply a method that's directly going to what I sometimes call a pain point. You know, where is the student learning breaking down? Is there a bottleneck? Are there common misconceptions? And you know, if something is working well, that's not the place to apply game based learning, Instead, let's go to the pain point. So Step A is ask where to apply [game based learning].

In the book we walk you through what questions to ask yourself about. You know, like what skills do you want students to practice, and when, and you know those kinds of things that helps to start to narrow down what I think of as infinite choices. We want to boost student engagement. We want to deepen student learning, and we just have to be strategic about, I'll use a business-y term, you know, like the return on investment.

I would recommend that for those wanting to teach students or help students learn about historical events, my favorite mechanic is the roleplay and simulation. Because it helps the students kind of immerse themselves, and there are different ways you can structure it. It will typically motivate students to do reading ahead of time, so that they can be very good at their role. There's a performative piece there.

And I'm gonna use some of our lingo from the book, if that's okay. So if another skill we are helping students learn is how to construct or critique an argument. I would recommend one of our complex mechanics called Find the Clue. It can help students handle sources, and it prompts them to use deductive and inductive thinking for that. Another one of our complex mechanics is called Meaning Play and this one is great to help students practice various interpretations of history. I think it's a really super at opening the door for things like more associative thinking, creative juxtaposition, [that] wonderful quality where we can try to become more comfortable with ambiguity.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: You already touched on this, maybe you could just add to it a little bit, because the Foreword to your book was written by Mark Carnes, creator of *Reacting to the Past*, which is probably the best known and widely used gamification of history education. So in what ways did your research build or draw on concepts from *Reacting*?

Tori Mondelli: Oh my goodness, it is such a such an honor for Joe and me to have Mark Carnes write the Foreword. It really gave us that affirmation of our work because we do draw heavily on *Reacting to the Past*, and then we extend from there in some ways. Mark, in his own book, *Minds on Fire*, explains RTTP, and I would recommend it to any of your readers who haven't checked out it out. It is just fascinating stuff, and you can see what other historians have to say about its power if you join the Faculty Lounge on Facebook.

This is an immersive, collaborative role playing game, *Reacting to the Past*. And you know what Mark says, and what we've seen, is that it really is a superb way to motivate our students to do the reading, to do the thinking, the writing, and the participating in your course that you've always hoped they would do. Roleplaying in the *Reacting* incarnation [gives] students a secret objective and it's subject to chance, [it's] random. That's one of our simple mechanics. And it's really an exciting proposition for students. There's the performative aspect, and in the classroom, the students will form different factions. They're accountable to one another, and they're more responsive to each other than you would see for regular group projects or class discussions. So our book explains why role playing is effective, as does Mark's.

And he also makes a great observation that students crave experiences that aren't so prescriptive, linear, and purely logical all the time. Joe and I definitely agree! And in learning games, you can set them up so that they offer a great deal of uncertainty [so] that there can be subversion of norms. You can open up imaginative spaces that students don't often get to traverse in traditional academic settings, and so philosophically, I believe, that's where Mark Carnes is, we share that.

But I also want to say that games and the *Reacting* community pays attention [to trust and safety]. Games can be structured, like if you're making your own games, to be safe places for [students to learn and thrive in] that kind of uncertainty and for risking things, even failing. I mean, sometimes failing is okay, sometimes even desirable in a game. So I guess I'll go on record and say, of all the mechanics and history games you can do, role playing is my favorite. When I discovered *Reacting* and got to meet Mark and experience it with Mark and with others, I definitely found my people.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you. That was really helpful. So I did want to touch on something else, a question I also discussed with Dr. Carnes in my interview for this special section. History educators face new challenges every day, and some issues have become significantly more difficult [in the past few decades]. In what ways can a gamification approach help teachers and college instructors meet the demands of teaching historical thinking today in the age of "alternative facts?"

Tori Mondelli: Well, games don't necessarily have to do it all! But [I have been thinking about] "alternative facts" and [teaching and learning in] the age of generative AI, artificial intelligence, and what power do games have? I did write a blog post for the Teachers College Press site, if anybody wants [to read] some ideas I have about incorporating things like ChatGPT into games, but also, like you know, in-class games as an alternative

and a compelling experience that students will opt into, because it's fun and cool, rather than want to lean on an AI tool.¹ But you know in our conversations here on campus we have been looking at pedagogically what to do about AI. Discussion of syllabi statements and choices around that, and just overall philosophy. And I think most people are landing on: "If we want to use games, and we want to not just shut down use of a generative AI, how about we find ways for students to best the Chatbot as game opponent? And I think I think that's a pretty cool thing to explore. Students can point out where it's inaccurate, incomplete, out of date, lackluster, right?"

I think we need to look at traditional ways that we teach critical thinking and information literacy and if we have signs that it's not working well, we can absolutely incorporate more games. There's a spotlight game in our book that teaches information literacy. It's by Maura Smale and she is a librarian within the City University of New York system, and it's just so cool and creative. So it may not mean that we have to reinvent the wheel as individuals, but get more in touch with open access materials, and her game is available open access. [We can look at] what resources are already out there, tried and true by colleagues, and come at it that way.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Listening to what you just said also made me think that there's an element in the games approach that kind of directly empowers students as learners in a way that the top down transmission model doesn't. And it seems like [that's] one of the very first things we need to do, to help students build digital literacy [skills]. To help them navigate AI is to empower them, as thinkers, to empower their academic agency, and seems like a games approach would really encourage that.

Tori Mondelli: Yeah, I'm so happy to hear you say that! I'm glad that's coming across as we're having this conversation because there's a research based principle that we know about, sometimes called co-design/agency. This goes back to self-determination theory around what motivates human beings as adult learners. Games are a fantastic way for students to, you know, be empowered in just that way, and I've seen that taken to the max when professors invite students to design learning games about courses content as [for example] a capstone or a final exam. So that's also really fun. [But] not all students want to do that, so let's give them choice. Let's empower them.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Oh, that sounds so interesting! I kind of want to get off this call and start doing my syllabus right now! [laughs] But I have a couple more questions, and you have already touched on this, but just to specifically address one of the most pressing problems I think everybody's heard college instructors share recently is how to best encourage student attendance and active participation in on-site classes and in-person, face-to-face classes. How do games and other creative activities facilitate, encourage student attendance and participation?

Tori Mondelli: Yeah, attendance can be, is, a significant challenge. You know, especially if you don't have a solid attendance policy. And we saw what COVID-19 did to attendance policies. We're still building back and trying to navigate everything. That said, and this is just general commentary, [attendance and participation increases] if students perceive that their peers and instructors will be looking for them to do [things] in class. For example, you have a role to play. You are responsible for this, so that I think that benevolent peer pressure helps people show up. [And] once they're in the classroom, the structure and the fun experience of that activity [or] game really help students kind of, well, to cite Csikszentmihalyi, play allows us to escape the tyranny of needs.

You know, at least for a little while. We can put everything aside and really find *flow* in a game experience and a playful experience. And so when you're thinking about attendance, and when you're thinking about active participation, that's what you want to do. You want to help students achieve a flow state so that even if they come in and they are maybe a little low energy, or in a bad mood, or you know whatever, that they have this

¹ Tori Mondelli, "Fun and Games at a Time Like This?" *Teachers College Press Blog*, March 13, 2023: <https://www.tcpres.com/blog/fun-games/>

opportunity to shift gears pretty profoundly. Help them settle in, help give them some focus, time on task, and positive feedback. I mean, that's what a good game does for you. So how do we achieve that? The first chapter of our book is all about engagement and we share five simple mechanics. They're called the Five Rs: Random, Rapid, Rival, Role, and Reward. These mechanics when you apply them to an activity, or you're building a game, they immediately deepen engagement. And that's because they introduce interactions that humans love.

And I'm thinking of our colleague, Josh Eyler's book, *How Humans Learn*.² He talks about curiosity. Good games are going to pique your curiosity, in addition to the five simple mechanics, which are really based on these larger engagement principles, curiosity being one of them. But when we design games, we want to intentionally use other engagement principles [such as] narrative, fantasy, sensory environment, frequent rewards, and feedback. In addition to that curiosity piece, we have to set the challenge at just the right place and we have to be imaginative and creative ourselves. Yes, give students powers, abilities and give them the freedom to explore and to collaborate and even integrate social interactions as part of the learning experience. All of those things will contribute to higher attendance and certainly more active participation.

I have one more example to spotlight. One of my favorite playful recommendations for any discipline to increase the active participation, but also to kind of balance the discussion, you know, how some students love to talk and can monopolize, right? So let's give the introverts a moment, Jessamyn, right? [laughs] It's called Talk Tokens and Carlos Hernandez, who's professor of English at City University of New York came up with this, and we describe it in our book. But I'll just give a quick summary and any reader should feel free to use this if it resonates. So as students are arriving, you give them three colored poker chips, maybe two red and a blue. Depends how long your discussion is. If it's going to be a short discussion, maybe give them less chips, one or two chips, and then tell them the object of the game is to get rid of your chips by the end of the class session, and that there is a prize for doing so when you hold the discussion whether that's in small groups, or with the whole class. The students, before they ask a question or answer a question, they have to play a red chip. They play a blue chip if they're offering a counterargument or alternate interpretation. Now, they can also trade red and blue chips within their group. Really, there aren't too many rules for this little game, this little playful interaction. But you can make a rule that prevents the same person from speaking until maybe three or four [other students speak]. It depends how large the class is. This minor accoutrement of these little poker chips works wonders for a discussion. It helps students meet our expectations in that setting. They're just a little more motivated. There's more structure to it. And you can certainly tell them about this beforehand, because I think it helps people mentally prepare and so they're not like "Oh my gosh, what's happening?!" That will give them a little more motivation to do the reading more closely and carefully. So then, the question of prizes, there should the prizes be, right? I always try to keep [prizes] low cost and no cost, and there's good reasons for that. We get into that in the book about not trying to do too much with prizes. You know, little things. Hershey kisses, class participation points, college stickers that you just pick up around campus, and that that kind of thing. I mean it doesn't have to be anything fancy.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: I love that example, and I think it's a great way to implement some of this that wouldn't require a massive restructuring of your syllabus. A small change you could make to give students a role in class to help them see the role in participation. So my last question, and again, you've definitely touched on it, but I just wanted to see if you could address it more specifically. This special section of this issue of the journal is called "History Fun and Games." So why is fun important to teaching and learning history?

Tori Mondelli: Bringing some playfulness, some fun, to history is a very humane thing to do and it will result in better student learning--if you use the ALLURE method, I can say that. So why is it humane? I mean, everyday life is difficult. Stress is high, and [we need to look for where] we can insert a kind of pressure relief valve for our students to relax and reach a positive, affective state of mind. When they're having fun, they are better able to

² Joshua Eyler, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories Behind Effective College Teaching* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018).

engage in challenging cognitive tasks, and learn new things and receive and integrate feedback. Not sure if folks have read Cia Verschelden's recent book on bandwidth, it's one of my favorites, and she shares that especially minoritized students and many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds benefit from bandwidth recovery activities, and games and play are bandwidth recovery activities.³ Cia's research is helpful pointing to [if] you want an inclusive and equitable classroom, doing some of these interactives [will help].

If you are getting started in this, and you don't want to go through a whole game design process, you might just want to intersperse some moments of playfulness. You can do that too, , especially if you're in a 90 min or two-hour seminar or something like that, you know, finding places to have a little playful breaks is a good idea.

Another reason why it's important to bring fun to teaching and learning history is because it will actually help [reduce] faculty burnout. It will help professors achieve more joy in our work lives. And Mark Carne speaks to this in his book, too, right at the beginning, when he's talking about why he was initially motivated to use roleplaying in history courses at Barnard. I see it with mid-career faculty and later career faculty that when they come to my workshops, it's a whole new world. So if you need that in your work life, this is a wonderful place for more of that vitality. [One of] my biggest hopes [is] if historians are moved to bring more fun into the classroom, they will avail themselves of all of the great open access resources that exist. CUNY has a great site on this.⁴ Harvard has a great site on this specifically for learning games.⁵ Joe and I are so pleased that our publisher agreed to make all of our ALLURE worksheets open access.⁶ People can print [them] out, centers for teaching and learning can use them, and structure their own workshops around these step by step design guides.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you. Is there anything else we didn't get a chance to talk about that you wanted to add?

Tori Mondelli: Just that faculty piece. You know, we're all very student-centered. We're always talking about what will this do for student learning and engagement? Being an educational developer and working with faculty, and as a director of the Center for over eleven years, I think of faculty, and I know that this is just a wonderful area for them to explore and come at their discipline in in a new way.

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Yeah, just recently, I've started saying at the beginning of every workshop, every consultation: "I will never recommend or suggest anything to you that will not make your teaching life better and more enjoyable."

Tori Mondelli: Yes!

Jessamyn Neuhaus: Thank you so much for your time and for talking with me today.

³ Cia Verschelden, *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017).

⁴ The CUNY Games Network, <https://games.commonsgc.cuny.edu/>

⁵ <https://ablconnect.harvard.edu/game-description>

⁶ Worksheet available on the College Teachers Press site at https://www.tcpress.com/the-educator%E2%80%99s-guide-to-designing-games-and-creative-active-learning-exercises-9780807767726?page_id=31