

Cultivating the Philosophical Imagination: Experiencing the Limits of Language with Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Habermas

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In this essay we present three arts-based and game-like participatory simulations that are designed to promote inquiry, curiosity, and play as students embody and enact otherwise opaque philosophical concepts. These three simulations invite students to experientially participate in the philosophical insights of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, and Jürgen Habermas regarding a deep but essential philosophical issue: the limits of language in expressing meaning, truth, and experience. Each thinker offers a unique perspective on the limitations of understanding through language, and thus each participatory simulation yields a unique experiential encounter of these perspectives for students. These experiences are supplemented by a curriculum of philosophical imagination in which students also deliberately discuss their experiences and pragmatically design their own participatory simulations to convey relevant perspectives on the limits of language from other philosophers or from their own perspective. These participatory simulations are based on the premise that philosophical imagination works best with encounters that link concepts and experience. In other words, the cultivation of philosophical imagination is connecting the enactment of the concept while simultaneously learning it. To describe the concept of philosophical imagination, first we define participatory simulations and philosophically ground the concept in an experiential aesthetic attitude. This provides the groundwork to then briefly describe previous attempts to shift philosophy away from pure textual analysis to a more experience based style of production. Finally we reveal three participatory simulations that are designed to evoke and demonstrate the cultivation of philosophical imagination within the milieu of an aesthetically minded, experience-based performance of philosophy.

PARTICIPATORY SIMULATIONS

In 1960 Jerome Bruner claimed “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”¹ A half century later, the success of educational implementations known as *participatory simulations* — a family of designed experiences also including augmented reality, virtual worlds, and computational tools — is demonstrating that Bruner’s provocative proclamation may have been right on the mark. Indeed, within the past several years, researchers in the learning sciences discourse using participatory simulations have generated existence proofs that children as young as 6 to 8 years old can recognize complex systems concepts such as emergence, feedback loops, and decentralized agency as well as physics concepts such as velocity, acceleration, and vector forces.²

From a Vygotskian perspective a reason that these participatory simulations are so successful is that they (a) leverage students’ natural competencies and abilities at role-playing (not to mention pattern-recognizing, and inquiry-forming) in order to

(b) enable groups of students to take on different agents in a system whose interactions are composed of simple but dynamic rules.³ Inasmuch as the interactions and its associated rules represent the concepts-to-be-learned students are able to directly experience these concepts. Moreover, students can invent symbols to express their experiences (of, say, feedback loops or decreasing acceleration), and in the presence of thoughtful scaffolding and feedback, students can learn how to map their intuited symbols onto more scientific notation systems.⁴ In summary, participatory simulations allow students to experientially embody the very principles, subject matter, and concepts that are otherwise too abstract or counter-intuitive to their pre-existing experiences to be adequately learned.⁵

These participatory simulations, however, are predominantly used by learning scientists to teach complex systems principles in math and science classes.⁶ Philosophical issues, such as the limits of language, the meaning of consciousness, or the problem of free will, have not been attempted to be addressed through participatory simulations. Furthermore, theorizing participatory simulations as rule-governed, agent-based activity systems in a Vygotskian framework also misses the significance and power of participatory simulations for cultivating the philosophical imagination. Thus, to understand how participatory simulations work for philosophical concepts and spark philosophical imaginative experiences, we need to borrow a perspective applicable to participatory simulations from outside of the learning sciences literature.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL—AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE

All of the computational tools, skits, and play-acting performances that underlie participatory simulations in general, can be understood from a philosophical aesthetic perspective; a perspective that has previously and successfully been used to analyze humans' interactions with, and experiences of, a variety of literary forms, artistic objects, and new media. From the philosophical—aesthetic perspective, which we take to originate independently in the work of Kenneth Burke and John Dewey, the locus of experience of a text is not centered in the literary form or the crafted object, but rather exists at the experiential edge of the active nature of the form or object and of the performative engagement of the subject.⁷ In other words, the aesthetic is not a property of a subject or object, but of the interplay between the two. This is how Burke argues proverbs should be understood in his *Philosophy of Literary Form*, “The point is not to find categories that ‘place’ proverbs once and for all. What I want is categories that suggest their active nature.”⁸ Their active nature is constituted by the processes subjects go through in becoming adequate to their meaning; processes such as daily recitation, contemplative meditation, life application, and so forth. The Stoics, for example, understood their own proverbs and aphorisms as cures for desire not because of the content contained within, but because of the perspective (on life, on death, on values) each affords.⁹ Take the case of Zen Koans which perform their readers into a state of contemplative meditation, or Wordsworth's poetry that performs its readers into a state of awe and reverence. Each demonstrates what John Lysaker remarks as a text's “performativity” and each demands to “be looked at in terms of its activity, not ‘just’ its meaning” as Tracy

Strong argues.¹⁰ This aspect of “performativity” is what enables participatory simulations to cultivate *philosophical imagination*.

PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGINATION

Philosophers, themselves, often present their own work in a vividly experiential manner — consider Plato’s allegories, Lewis Carroll’s logic puzzles, Soren Kierkegaard’s parables, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s plays. To read their work is to enact a performance — to partake in an event — that engages one’s sensibilities for inquiry, curiosity, and play. To simply read *about* their work, however, is to miss these performances and the opportunities they provide for deepening and enriching one’s philosophical imagination. As Martha Nussbaum argues, to divorce the philosophical content from its original form is to preclude the visceral experience otherwise provided by literary forms such as Plato’s dialogues, Epictetus’s Aphorisms, Friedrich Nietzsche’s novella, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journals, and Voltaire’s wit.¹¹

Such visceral forms of philosophy communicate more than content or meaning — rather, they profoundly perform readers into alternative modes of subjectivity and ways of being in the world.¹² Such experiences can significantly shift the way we orient ourselves toward our relationships, values, and practices — opening these up for reflection and reinvention through inquiry, curiosity, and play. Of course, not every interaction or visceral experience will poignantly transform every reader or even the same reader at different points in their life, but learning philosophy without such interactions arguably leads to an impoverished *philosophical imagination* — one lacking in inquiry, curiosity, and play with one’s orientations toward the world and one’s self.¹³ Drawing on these insights, we envisage a pragmatically situated learning environment where a community of inquirers experiences, builds, and reflects on philosophical perspectives.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGINATION

This vision of pedagogical activities centered on the development of the philosophical imagination is closely aligned with current proposals and movements from both philosophers and educators. Consider Peter Singer’s emphasis on “philosophy as a method of enquiring into very fundamental questions that do not yield to the methods of science,” rather than “philosophy ... thought of as a body of knowledge.”¹⁴ Or pragmatist Roberto Mangabeira Unger’s condemnation of philosophy as thought policing rather than as a way “to help inform and even inspire our practices of individual and collective self-reinvention.”¹⁵ Also consider Kieran Egan’s proposal of teaching by transforming knowledge into imaginatively engaging pedagogical activities that can stimulate wonder and inquiry for communities of students.¹⁶ This shift in philosophy as discipline to philosophy as a mode of being couched in an ever-evolving community of inquiry is echoed in Matthew Lipman’s proposal for a philosophy for children program. Such a shift requires “philosophy redesigned and reconstructed so as to make it available and acceptable and enticing to children. Moreover, the pedagogy by which the subject was to be presented would have to be just as drastically redesigned as the subject itself.”¹⁷

If philosophical subject matter could be redesigned into concrete embodied experiences, and if students were given chances to deliberately discuss their experiences as well as fashion their own philosophical artifacts and participatory simulations to help others experience alternative points of views on philosophical issues that matter to them, then an environment of inquiry, curiosity, and play would likely develop. Even in the absence of this fuller curriculum, the very embodiment of concrete experiences of philosophical perspectives can serve as pathways for more abstract understanding later on.¹⁸ This is why our activities begin with first-person experiences and activities (what we are calling arts-based participatory and game-like simulations) that embody philosophical issues rather than with third-person accounts of these same issues.

In this essay we have argued that participatory simulations in the form of arts-based and game-like philosophy-oriented activities can engage students in philosophical play and experiences that parallel concepts developed by philosophers. In short, this activity evokes philosophical imagination. We now demonstrate three cases in which participatory simulations have been designed and used to cultivate philosophical imagination. Although we profile three specific philosophers and their concepts, we believe along with Bruner, that any subject can be taught to any student when rendered in a form accessible and appealing. Given this, we intend the following examples of participatory simulations to be illustrative of a general paradigm of research and pedagogy, rather than an end-all representation of the work that might be done.

THREE EXAMPLES OF ARTS-BASED AND GAME-LIKE PHILOSOPHICAL PARTICIPATORY SIMULATIONS

WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE GAMES¹⁹

The central concept to be learned in this conceptual arts-based participatory simulation is the idea that words and definitions depend on the interaction of people to give them meaning. Words in-themselves cannot mean anything without their *use*. Thus, like the chess analogy in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, the piece named "king" only means "king" within the enacted rules of the game.²⁰ The king as a chess-piece could be substituted with a grape, as long as its *use* in the game is as the "king." The goal is to evoke philosophical imagination as the participants experience the concept in its use, simultaneously discovering Wittgenstein's ideas as they enact them.

To achieve knowledge of this concept through enactment of a philosophical simulation of Wittgenstein's textual explanation of the limits of language, the activity is divided into three parts. The first is called "definitions." The participants receive a word to define among the players. The only rule is that everyone playing the word must agree with the definition. The words can range in complexity from something as invitingly complex as "Being" for older students to something as simple as the color "red" for younger ones. The point is that the definition of a word depends on the context in which the word is used, *and* also a community in which understanding can occur. This activity brings to life the notion of signs and language understanding being achieved through consensus *and* use. Also, as different teams

play a game, as players change over the generations, the concept of Wittgenstein's articulation of language as used and experienced in a community of practice is mirrored.

The second action is called "dead-words." Relating to the final point above, one of Wittgenstein's points about language and language games is that they emerge and disappear as the communities of practice change.²¹ The second game resurrects dead-words, and as the group uses them again, perhaps giving them new life, the role of the "player" (subject) in the game becomes even further developed. The philosophical imagination evoked here is simply the difference between meanings and signs in language. For example, the word for "maffle" might be "dead," but its meaning, "to stammer," moves on as the communicative culture continues. The point here is to reveal that on the one hand language is organic and shifts even if thought of as a collection of words (that is, "dead-words"); but on the other hand, thinking with Wittgenstein's philosophical imagination, if language is thought of as rules, or a game, it simply absorbs or uses any sign, they are arbitrary (like the grape becoming the king in chess). It is always the use of signs that *puts into play* meaning. "Dead-words" tries to deepen the concepts explored in game one, but also links to the third game, which involves examining the arbitrary nature of signs in language.

The third incarnation in the sequence of the arts-based philosophical simulation is called "René Magritte's Riddles." Guessing riddles is one of the language games listed by Wittgenstein in his work in *Philosophical Investigations*.²² This experience uses the artist René Magritte's conceptual-art-riddles as another way in which to understand conceptually the limits of language and the role of signs within it. For Magritte, like Wittgenstein, language as a collection of signs is not what really defines it. In this last sequence of the game, riddles are used as visual explorations



Wittgenstein Language Games I (©Kristopher Holland, 2001)

of the role signs play in language. Magritte reveals the inter-changeability of objects as symbols, such as the grape for the king, can be explored in the experience of riddles, just as Wittgenstein alludes to. The students here are to read and explore the riddles, which serve to spark the philosophical imaginative moment connecting the limits and use of language they have developed in the first two sections. It is hoped that they begin to apply the concept of language games experienced in the first two games to solve the riddles of Magritte, thus completing the goal of the simulation to both learn and deploy the concepts simultaneously.

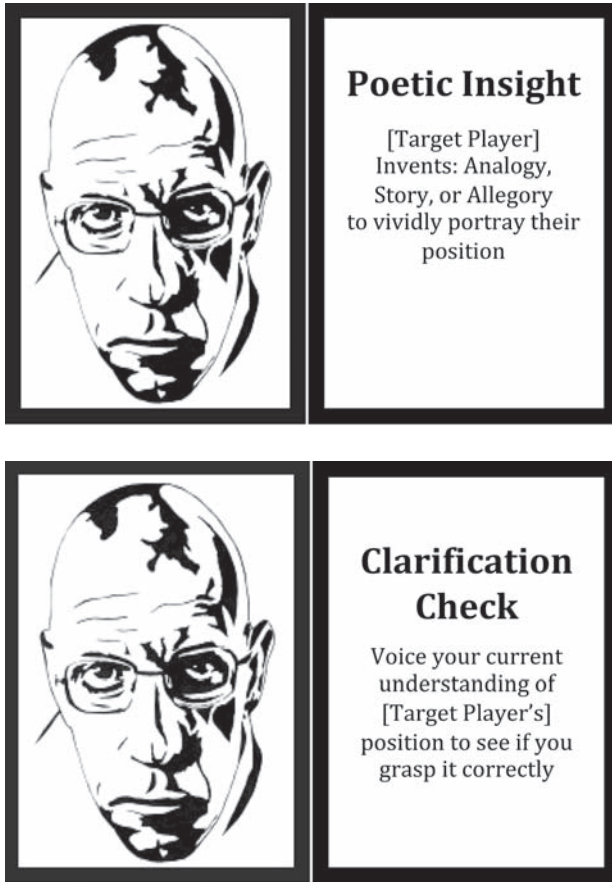
THE FOUCAULT GAME

In his later thought on the role of free speech (termed *Parrhesia* by the Greeks) in resisting power relations and opening up critical risk-taking on one's own ideas, Foucault distinguishes between performative speech and parrhesiastic speech (for example, freely open) in three fundamental respects. First, "in a performative utterance," Foucault remarks, "the effect which follows is known and ordered in advance, it is codified," whereas the parrhesiastic utterance, by contrast, "does not produce a codified effect; it opens up an unspecified risk."²³ The performative utterance thus might be any ceremonial or unequivocal statement such as "let us begin" or "move over so I can sit down," while the parrhesiastic utterance refers to the opening up or risking of an idea, rendering it vulnerable to change or growth. A paradigmatic example is the request for evaluative feedback on one's own ideas, or the putting of one's conjectures on trial to see if they hold true in practical application.

Second, to qualify as parrhesiastic the idea risked or tested must not be any idea at all, but rather an idea one holds to be authentic to one's own sincerely held beliefs or positions. Last, a parrhesiastic utterance does not appeal to authority, status, threats, or any other strategic element as a performative utterance typically does ("as the speaker of the house I hereby adjourn the meeting" or "move your seat or I will hurt you"). Thus, the parrhesiastic speech act is vulnerable to critique, sincere to one's beliefs, and nonprivileged with respect to authority, status, or other strategic acts of power.

Foucault's card game is designed to experientially parallel and support parrhesiastic free-speech during group discussions on philosophical issues (although arts discussions or science topics will work as well). Before the class discussion, students are dealt three random cards that they are allowed to play at any time of their choosing. Each card functions to open up a particular idea, insight, or position in the discussion to further consideration and evaluation. Thus, the cards punctuate the discussion with moments of risk and indeterminacy (as opposed to merely generating codified and predictable responses) by opening up discussants' arguments for explicit deliberation.

The cards do not take the place of the conversation but rather supplement the already ongoing conversation. At the end of class, players share-out their impressions and experiences of the game, and make suggestions for removing, revising, or creating additional cards to further address any concerns about the style and norms of the class discussions. As players perform and are performed by these parrhesiastic



speech acts, they come to terms with Foucault's vision of the limits of language (a discussion whose end result is already predetermined by the power structures in play) and his own best solution to the problem.

A few examples:

- Down-to-Earth: Request [Target Player] to give a real-life example of what they are talking about.
- Same Page: Share your current understanding of [Target Player's] idea to see if you understand it.
- Provisional Check: Ask [Target Player], "What evidence would it take for you to change your mind?"
- Poetic Insight: Request [Target Player] to create an analogy, story, or allegory to vividly portray their insight.
- Devil's Advocate: Create reasonable counter-arguments to [Target Player's] position or belief.

- Thought Experiment: What if everybody in the world adopted [Target Player’s] position on the given dilemma or debate? What implications would this have for resolving the dilemma? Alternatively, what if nobody subscribed to the position?

THE HABERMAS MACHINE (COMPLEX 3)

Without presenting the entire set of the activities designed to explore Habermas’s magnum opus the *Theory of Communicative Action*, we focus on Section 3 of Holland’s participatory art piece called the “Habermas Machine.” Section 3 of the “Habermas Machine” foregrounds the concept of pure-subjectivity (or “privileged access of a subject”) with a two-fold approach. First is the notion that within any experience there is privileged access or pure subjectivity that is part of subjective experience. Second is that this experience depends on a “prior commonality” in order to relay the experience to another person. So in any experience there is the connection between the pure subjectivity of a person and the mediation of the experiences through a *presupposed* commonality — or “prior communication community.”

Here the notions around conversation fit into Habermas’s inter-subjective framework, in which communicative rationality and action function to “give life” to experience. In other words, we have meaning in inter-subjective frameworks, and part of this is the self-as-subject’s personal experience being voiced to an “other.” What section 3 of the “Habermas Machine” does is address this concept by bringing the “operation of inter-subjectivity” to the forefront by making students experience the limits of inter-subjective communication.



The Habermas Machine: Complex 3 (©Kristopher Holland, 2006)

To experientially parallel this concept, two participants are tasked to verbally communicate what a provided “visual work” or image looks like, but only one participant is given the image; the other is blind to it. Thus, the student is trying to describe an art piece to another who is attempting to make sense of the object without seeing it, only being told what it “looks like.” The challenge starts with easily recognizable images and incrementally grows in difficulty to abstract ones. The build from “realism” to abstraction (which could be done either way) is evoked, but the point is that there would be almost no way for the person who sees the object to be able to have the other person “see” what they see. The privileged position of the first participant is fore-grounded by the frustrating experience the second student has trying to figure out the details and recreate the object. As the object is finally revealed to the student, the difference between the reality described to them and the reality they “see” activates a memory of the conversation and the shortcoming of verbal communication in the descriptive process. This participatory experience reveals the paradox in which the limits of language and the simultaneous requisite for using language in mediating experience and expressing ideas is evoked and joins the philosophical imagination of the students.

Thus participating in this experience creates a feeling of frustration both by the limited ability of the “seeing” participant to use only language to describe the object and in the inability of the “blind” participant to understand what the other is telling them to imagine. This section of a larger conceptual project is something that is experienced within this activity and begins to bring into action some of Habermas complex work. The philosophical imaginative moment the “Habermas Machine” is meant to examine relates to questions about the relationship between the objective, subjective, and normative domains of knowledge, and the “knowing subjects” inter-subjective frameworks for building that knowledge.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Participatory simulations serve as opportunities for participants to cultivate their philosophical imaginations. Use of participatory simulations offers another supporting and nonexclusive way of presenting the ideas found in primary texts to “readers” and “participants” who may find third-person encounters of texts to be a mode of presentation of ideas that is not conducive to learning for reasons explored by educational psychologists (that is, Bruner). Thus we suggest that philosophical concepts presented simply through primary texts present the reader with a limited discourse from which to absorb the ideas. As the challenge of the ideas become pedagogical, the role of the facilitator might be to provide students with the environment for generating their own “version” of the concepts. In this line, we have generated the three above described participatory simulations as proof-of-concept evidence that another mode for presenting philosophical ideas is possible. In the three examples we provide in this essay, philosophical concepts are presented in participatory forms that are more accessible to participants who may have less foundation in philosophical readings and literature than the general audience of philosophical writers. Such increase in participant access to concepts is the very focus of creating more equitable and democratic pedagogy.

Hence, we believe that participatory simulations offer a way in which to expand the audience of philosophical dialogue to those who for various reasons are not as versed in philosophy or as yet are not able to read it. However, rather than seeing our advocacy for participatory simulations as a replacement of primary texts, we see them as quite the opposite; just as Bruner noted the use of embodied enactments as a scaffold to use of iconic (for example, pictograms) and finally symbolic (for example, writing and mathematical-logical formula) we see that such participatory simulations serve as scaffolds which may open the door to presentations of philosophical concepts as found in traditional philosophical literature.

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1. Jerome Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 33.
 2. See Joshua A. Danish, "BeeSign: A Design Experiment to Teach Kindergarten and First Grade Students about Honeybees from a Complex Systems Perspective" (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, Calif., April 2009); and Noel Enyedy, Joshua Danish, and Girlie Delacruz, "Play and Augmented Reality in Learning Physics: The SPASES Project" (paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Denver, Colo., April, 2010).
 3. Joshua A. Danish, Kyle Peppler, and David Phelps, "Designing to Support Mediated Group Inquiry of Complex Science by Early Elementary Students" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, La., April 2011).
 4. Enyedy, Danish, and Delacruz, "Play and Augmented Reality in Learning Physics."
 5. Uri Wilensky and Kenneth Reisman, "Thinking Like a Wolf, a Sheep, or a Firefly: Learning Biology Through Constructing and Testing Computational Theories — An Embodied Modeling Approach," *Cognition and Instruction* 24, no. 2 (2006): 171–209.
 6. See Northwestern University's Participatory Simulations Project, <http://ccl.northwestern.edu/ps/>.
 7. See Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); and John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980).
 8. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 2.
 9. See Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
 10. See John Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Tracey B. Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
 11. Thus, the term philosophical imagination describes an enlarged concept of what is typically labeled moral imagination. See Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.
 12. See Lysaker, *Emerson and Self-Culture*; and Strong, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation."
 13. See Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction: The Experience Book* (New York: Continuum, 2009); and Christopher Falzon and Timothy O'Leary, eds., *Foucault and Philosophy* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2010).
 14. Peter Singer, "Coping with Global Change: The Need for New Values," *Journal of Human Values* 2, no. 1 (1996): 37–48.
 15. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 231.
 16. See Kieran Egan, *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).
 17. Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 262.

18. See Laurance Splitter and Ann Margaret Sharp, *Teaching for Better Thinking: The Classroom Community of Enquiry* (Melbourne, Vic.: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1995).
19. Here the term “language-game” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a life-form. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 10.
20. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 13.
21. *Ibid.*, 10.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College de France, 1982–1983* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 62.