Play Without Limits: The "Immeasurable" Value of Libraries

Presentation to attendees of the 2019 [Re]Pensar Rethinking Public Libraries conference in Portugal.

1: Batman and the Fitbit

I always feel a bit guilty that I'm not a bigger fan of computer games. I mean, they look so good these days. People tell me that the storytelling is so complex, that the graphics and the whole experience are more like a Hollywood movie than the old games I played in the 80s.

This is a game I used to play called EXORCIST. It's basically Pac-man with ghosts. (Well: Pac-Man had ghosts too. So maybe it's just Pac-man with a little sprite chasing the ghosts instead of a strange circular gobbler).

I loved this game so much when I was at infant school that it appears in my word book. This was a special book where the teacher would write down complicated words which you wanted to learn, to help you with the spelling.

Look - on this page - two fairly surprising words: Esprit and Exorcist.

I wasn't a precocious kid. I wanted to know Exorcist because of the computer game and I wanted to know Esprit because of James Bond's car.

So I don't play many computer games, even now when everybody plays computer games, but I did get into these video games on your phone, by a company called Telltale.

They are adventure games, where you can fight enemies but also solve puzzles and, most importantly, talk to people. They make them for all sorts of series - Walking Dead, Game of Thrones, and Batman.

I played some of the Batman games. The fighting wasn't very exciting, and nor were the puzzles, but I liked the bits where you talk to people.

The game will give you choices in a conversation, and a time limit to make a choice for how Batman responds. The choices you make affect how the other characters react to and perceive you - you can make friends or enemies, you can build or break the trust of other people.

I liked a game called THE ENEMY WITHIN. In that game, you work with a troubled young man who might become Batman's arch-enemy the Joker. You feel like your choices might save him from a darker path. That, if you choose wisely, he might live a healthy normal life - or perhaps even become a hero.

You become emotionally invested in the game, because it is as much about relationships and trying to save someone from a harmful destiny as punching things or solving logic puzzles.

But you really only have so many choices to make in the game, and they have already been decided for you by the designers, who have written different possible narratives, like train tracks which you can switch between. You're really no more free than the little old Exorcist in its 1980s maze.

When you finish each chapter of the Batman game, it lets you review your choices. It shows you what percentage of players made the same choices as you - to respond with violence or kindness, to save one character or another, to be truthful or to deceive.

You find yourself feeling affirmed and justified when the majority of other players agree with your choice, or surprised and offended - or sometimes superior - when you find they chose differently from you.

And you suddenly realise that not only are your choices limited by the designers, but they are tracking your choices, turning them into data which they will store and use as the basis for future products.

The digital age has the power to set us free in so many ways, giving us access to vast amounts of information, knowledge, and culture - and the ability also to create, comment, author, and explore on our own terms. Yet it's also entwined with a culture of surveillance, control, and profit which challenges that freedom.

It's not just the videogames following your choices. It's the monitoring device which tells you how many steps you've taken today, how many calories burned, how many stairs climbed, and prompts you to do more, to move when you have been sitting too long at your desk.

It's the insurance company which will want access to that data, or will offer you a discount if you agree to be monitored.

The American health business Aetna even gives a bonus to employees if they have a consistent period of healthy sleep - monitored by their tracking devices.

It's either a great incentive - business finally recognising that sleep and rest is important to our productivity - or it is super creepy: your employer trying even to control your sleeping habits.

The consumers of digital culture might feel able to play, but how much control do they have?

Which stories are they allowed to play in and how much are they allowed to change those stories?

How closely are they being watched, and by whom, and why?

When we talk about gaming and play in libraries, we are not just talking about bringing in a digital device, or buying an external product, a ready made game or a format devised and designed by someone else.

It is about giving people the freedom to play in a unique way, led by the community as much as possible.

2: Melon Boy and the Time Train

Let's look at an environment whose inhabitants are closely monitored, guided and controlled.

Let's look at members of our society who are among the most vulnerable and the most constrained.

A group of people who we all say we want to love and support, but who have very little freedom to steer their own lives.

Children in infant school.

I was an infant school teacher in my twenties. I worked with kindergarten kids and first graders. By the standards of modern schooling, those years are actually pretty free - with time to play and explore - but that's not saying much. What freedom there is carefully limited, and shrinking all the time. Ultimately the school is being guided by policies from above. The curriculum. Guidelines for teachers. Monitoring and assessment of children's performance.

Lessons would follow a relatively fixed format, and the focus was ensuring that children met or exceeded the expected levels for their age range. This could be especially challenging when you were working, as I was, in a school with many children who were from migrant families, who spoke English only as a second language.

One senior teacher told me not to worry about the things that were not being measured - every act as a teacher should focus on moving the numbers that mattered to the government.

Another teacher, working with older children who were aware they needed to meet government literacy levels, said to pupils, "This good writing - but how could you **up-level** your work?"

Not "improve", "up-level".

If a child improved their work, they might be allowed to decide what counted as improvement.

But if you are "up-levelling", you are only focussed on fitting into the boxes imposed on you.

All of this helped the government to track which children were at risk of being left behind, and perhaps it helped to make sure that teachers were doing their job and not just indulging their whims — but there was little or no space for children's curiosity. Yet the very best moments in the classroom came when the children had a chance to play and surprise us.

Like the first time J ever made himself laugh. He was drawing in art class - art class is always the best for talking and pursuing unpredictable thoughts, even when the whole group is drawing the same "still life" flowers - and J told me, "I love melon. I just love it. My mother said if I ate enough melon, I might turn in to one."

He paused and let himself think about this.

"I could become a superhero. Melon Boy!"

And then he began to giggle. The giggle became a laugh. And little J's eyes grew wide with surprise. He had made himself laugh uncontrollably at his own joke.

It was such a wonderful moment that I brought the class together to share it. I took out the small whiteboards which the kids could draw on with marker pens, and we turned each whiteboard into the panel of a comic - the Adventures of Melon Boy. Each child drew their own panel of the comic, then shared it with the whole class - so that we could decide where the adventure went together, one step at a time.

The Melon Boy's arch enemy was a witch, who invited him for tea - then she served him so much cake that he turned into Cake Boy and lost his melon superpowers!

I was pleased to share J's joke with the class and turn it into an art and literacy activity which I could write up for assessment. But the children didn't need me there to play and explore.

Our school had a large wooden beam in the playground which children could climb on during the break times. One day, I was on playground duty, and I saw six boys all sitting on the log, then moving around it and sitting down again.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh, this is our Time Train," one of them said. "It travels in time."

"Really?" I was very impressed - I had been teaching time to these children and I knew they were not yet able to successfully put yesterday, today, and tomorrow on a timeline - so how could they travel in time?

"What do you do with your Time Train?" I asked.

"Oh, we just hang out on it, in space," they said. "(It also goes in space). Then sometimes the baddies break the Time Train and we have to go out and fix it. Then we just hang out again when it's fixed."

"Well done, boys," I said - and I meant it. They had made a shared imaginary world to be friends in. They had some idea of time travel from a TV show or a comic, but I knew it wasn't really about moving forwards and backwards through the days, months, and years. It was about being in another, more fantastic world. It was playing together, but not to score points, rather to make a shared story.

3: Who Tells The Story?

This kind of behaviour has been studied in much greater depth by education researchers around the world.

Professor Jackie Marsh of the University of Sheffield has written extensively about this kind of children's play, which sits somewhere between games and storytelling - an open-ended experience of shared make believe.

She points out how very young children mimic adult actions such as stirring a pot or answering the telephone.

How later they will dress up and pretend to be parents, or animals, or fictional characters.

Perhaps in the past those characters included cowboys or knights, fairies and witches from children's fiction. In my time those characters were joined by figures from cartoons and movies, the robots of Transformers or the heroes and villains of Star Wars. Today, it will include Lego's Ninjago characters, or the soldiers from video games like Call of Duty.

As Professor Marsh puts it, the popular culture of toys, games, cartoons, and comics is children's folk culture, their folklore. She cites Peter & Iona Opie, scholars of childhood play, on how children use this culture to make sense of the world:

"Whatever has latest caught their fancy is tested on their perpetual stage."

Sometimes adults will endorse this play and sometimes they will seek to limit or control it, but it belongs wholly to children.

In fact, here's a good example - the story of the school that banned dancing because it was too violent.

My cousin's son, just about to turn eleven years old, is a big fan of the game Fortnite. You can customise your character in the game, changing their appearance, their costume, and even giving them special dance moves.

At his school, the kids who play Fortnite like to copy these dances during their breaktime. The teachers in his school have decided that the game, with teams of players fighting to the death in an ever-shrinking arena, is too violent. Never mind that children used to play shooting games with cowboys or soldiers or Transformers or Star Wars' rebels and stormtroopers: the latest panic is Fortnite, and so they have banned the Fortnite dances in the playground.

Yet, as with all cultures and communities, if you respect another culture and engage with it, the rewards can be enormous. Another piece of research by Professor Marsh, almost twenty years old now, was written at the height of Teletubby mania. She showed that when children were given Teletubby-themed materials to explore literacy with - the task was to create a recipe for the Tubby Custard which Teletubbies ate - they performed better than with regular materials. The Teletubby theme spoke to very young children in the language, imagery, characters, and stories of their own culture.

Imagine what would happen if instead of banning the Fortnite dances, the school recognised that these dances are separate from the shooting element of the game, recognised their values as part of the children's culture, and let them use that culture as part of their learning experience.

Today, in 2019, this isn't just a matter for children. Popular culture is part of every generation's folk culture now. We live in an age saturated by media, when stories are told and broadcast and transmitted over and over again. Three generations of a family may sit together and watch Star Wars films, all fully aware of the mythology of Darth Vader, Princess Leia, and their universe. So the question in this era becomes, not just what stories do we share, but who has control?

That's not just a question for the classroom or the playground anymore. Because those stories are on our screens and smart devices, with us almost everywhere we travel. And when we look for spaces where people are free to play, explore, and experiment with information, knowledge, and culture - one of the most hopeful options is the public library.

4: The Playful Library

Libraries have a long and strong association with books and the printed word. It's a good and beautiful thing. For centuries, our institutions have both guarded and given access to information, knowledge, and culture mostly via written stuff on shelves. Today, it's also common to offer internet access, wifi, and an increasing range of video and audio media, activities and programmes for people of all ages, storytimes for children, digital literacy, and other programmes.

The medium is not what is important: it is the way we facilitate exploration of information, knowledge, and culture which makes us distinctive and valuable as an institution.

Libraries are machines for playing with information, knowledge, and culture. In these places we can uncover old meanings or create new ones, making discoveries and expanding our own understanding.

If you were going to write out a library's mission, you might put it like this:

A library empowers communities to explore information, knowledge, and culture on their own terms.

And that exploration looks more like the kinds of play we have been discussing here than anything else.

Exploration of information, knowledge, and culture doesn't just mean reading, viewing, or learning; it can mean making, experimenting, performing.

Finding stuff out for yourself isn't always like checking the weather forecast or looking up the capital of Peru. Sometimes discovery is an act of creation. Think of a sculptor, pondering the stone before them, trying to find the sculpture within: "I saw an angel in the marble and carved until I set them free."

Your community might want or need maker technology, Internet access, loanable tools and hardware, video games, art supplies, an in-library recording studio.

In Parkes, Australia, we created a live-action zombie game with 100 high school children battling zombies in an agricultural showground. There were challenges planned within the game but the children decided for themselves how to survive the adventure. Teachers, local people, fire fighters, and the police all came together to make a unique immersive adventure for the young people of three rural towns.

The schools saw the educational benefit, the town wanted people to use the showground, the police and firefighters both had programmes for outreach & connection with the community - so we were helping to fulfil their institutional goals. But the library was the institution which coordinated the schools, the community, and devised the challenge - because the library is the institution which develops opportunities for people to play and explore.

Not every form of exploration requires this kind of theatre and energy. The same library in Australia also made community board games for young people and adults, and even took those board games to bars for older members of the community to play, and inspire their curiosity.

Other libraries help people to be curious in different ways. 3D printers, which turn code into physical constructs, offer new opportunities for us to be curious about materials

Frysklab in the Netherlands, who you'll be hearing from later, adapted a German organisation's "Data Detox Kit" which helps people to be critical and curious about how much data they are sharing online. The tasks help you to investigate different aspects of your online identity, but they do not dictate what you should do next - they foster your curiosity and then give you freedom of choice.

There are many ways to fulfil libraries' mission and the medium is not specified.

In some ways, none of this should surprise us the UNESCO 1994 Public Library Missions, agreed by the United Nations' culture organisation and the international federation of library associations, set out a clear message that libraries embraced technology, performance, culture, and information sources of all kinds when serving their communities. In fact, if you look carefully, you'll see that the word "book" doesn't appear even once - although reading and literacy do.

The important thing to recognise is that no one medium, no one gadget, no one programme or physical object is necessary for a library to be great.

What matters is the question: who gets to play, and who controls the activity?

Who is granted access and authority?

Whose curiosity is indulged and encouraged, and how free are people to go where curiosity takes them?

Public librarians don't give grades like a teacher and we don't score points like a computer game, so we might do better than the people trying to sell you Batman games, but does that mean we are doing enough?

In the public library, what welcome and support should be given to homeless people? To drug users? To new migrants, or people who don't speak the majority language? Does everyone have a fair opportunity to play with information, knowledge, and culture?

Great librarians recognise that for the community to have equity in exploring knowledge, information and culture, they will have to make extra effort to help some groups. They may also have to curb the acts of some users if those acts impede the goal of access for all. We see this with the increasing rise of hate speech and aggressive political activism.

There is no easy solution to the challenges of a changing society. When librarians make decisions about inclusion, exclusion, equity, and justice, the process must be dynamic, local, and held in dialogue with peers, stakeholders, and the community your library serves.

It also means thinking about recruitment and your human resources policy. Does your organisation do enough to recruit widely? Do all your library staff look the same, talk the same, think the same? Who is missing from the conversation? Have you made sure your organisation actively works to make people from all backgrounds and identities welcome?

Information, knowledge, and culture are things which are lived, felt, and experienced by all of humanity. Great libraries recognise that they require a diverse workforce. The wider the range of experiences and identities represented by the library staff, the better understanding they will have of the diversity of human information, knowledge, and culture, and the more ways they will have of relating to the communities they serve.

Great libraries devise new opportunities to celebrate, provoke, challenge, and pique the curiosity of their community. They acquire, preserve, and develop collections to serve their communities' needs; they negotiate with peer institutions and publishers for access to more information; they devise systems and procedures to share their collections and borrow from others as needed. They might offer makerspace technologies, or zombie battles, or digital games, or comic making workshops, or books full of shelves, but their every act is guided by the question:

How does this empower the communities we serve to explore information, knowledge, and culture on their own terms?

5: The Playful Librarians

I want to share a wonderful secret with you now. It's one of those things which is easily overlooked, but obvious as soon as someone says it. I know it took me a long time to realise this:

Librarians are not separate from the communities they serve.

This means that

"How does this empower the communities we serve to explore information, knowledge, and culture on their own terms?"

also means

"How does this empower *our staff* to explore information, knowledge, and culture on their own terms?"

Here are four playful librarians with stories to share:

Audrey Huggett

We've already talked about zombie battles and roleplay. This is one of the most dramatic and physical ways of bringing play to life. If that seems too much to start with, there are also murder mystery games, and escape rooms, where people try to solve a puzzle within a fixed time limit.

But libraries can take this concept even further, by maximising community control. In Ann Arbor, Michigan, public librarian Audrey Huggett is developing larger community led roleplaying events. Beginning with a simple murder mystery to practice storytelling and working with volunteer performers, she is now devising playful activities where members of the community step into imaginary stories and get to make decisions with lasting consequences. What happens in one game feeds into the next one, like episodes of an ongoing drama.

Audrey says:

"What excites me is the possibility that if we invite the audience to participate in the story, to become characters themselves, then the choices and changes which they are making will become the true source of the drama. We'll move beyond puzzle-solving and choose-your-own adventures to a truly interactive narrative, a story told together by the library and the community in a make-believe world."

Jacinta Sutton

Sometimes playing with collections involves words, sometimes images. Jacinta Sutton of the State Library of Queensland Australia supervises the digital collections, supporting volunteers to add metadata, encouraging librarians to update Wikipedia with accurate information, and finding new ways to engage the community with a vast amount of material stored online.

One of the most playful approaches is called FunFace Lab. Jacinta found a face-swapping app for mobile devices and then picked out some portraits from the State Library's historic collections. When people visit the library, they can take a selfie and then insert their face into a historic Queensland image. The past comes alive and is playfully connected to the digital present, when we use our smart devices to become authors of our own self-portraits. We get to shape not only our own identity, in our choice of selfie, but to connect it with the images of our heritage, thanks to Jacinta's project.

Mal Booth

Play can dramatise and bring to life not just the content of our collections, but also the infrastructure too. The University of Technology Sydney's now-retired chief librarian Mal Booth invited artists into their library for creative residences, exploring the collections, services, and the library environment. One of the most exciting products came from the artist Chris Gaul, who created a "library spectrum", with colours matching the categories of the Dewey Decimal system.

What made this more than just a pretty artwork was the next, practical, and adventurous step: the team at the university library translated the artwork into a feature on the online catalogue, so that users could browse the collections by colour. As you touch a colour on the spectrum, it expands to show a wider range of tones representing the individual subcategories. It creates a new, serendipitous browsing experience unique to the digital age, discovered by allowing an artist to play with the collections.

Dr. Ludi Price

If popular culture is everyone's folk culture, and digital devices have opened up new ways to create, consume, criticise, and communicate, then librarians can learn about cataloguing and taxonomy from what people are doing with their smart devices.

Writers of fan fiction around the world make up their own stories about characters and situations from popular culture, crafting their own narratives from the stories given to us via the mass media.

Doctor Ludi Price, of City University of London, researches how this fan fiction community catalogues and categories the fan fictions they create and consume.

Ludi points out that fans engage in complex information management behaviour which information professionals could learn from, especially in a time when we seek ways to engage the public with our collections. By studying the ways of managing information which people have created for themselves, librarians might redevelop their own information infrastructure - and find new ways to invite the community in, to play with and develop it on their own terms.

When we look at how people play with information - organise it and reorganise it, label it and arrange it for their own convenience and delight - we look towards a world where people can truly choose their own adventure. Play is a place to explore and rehearse - time without a deadline or an output or a victory condition. Yet, as these examples show, this doesn't mean that time spent in play is pointless or impractical or wasted.

6: Playing for the Future

So, to recap —

Much of what looks like play in our time is actually about being controlled and monitored by someone else. Often, that's so they can make money from us.

Children are some of the most controlled members of society, but children's play, when it escapes adult control, is wild and rich and meaningful. Children play to make sense of the world, and so can we.

Libraries are excellent institutions for this kind of play, because they empower communities to explore the universe of information, knowledge, and culture on their own terms - whether the medium is books, technology, role play, art materials, or something else entirely.

This is something we have always done, our truest and most historic mission, and everything you experience today and tomorrow, no matter how surprising or futuristic or experimental, is a reaffirmation and a revitalisation of libraries' core duty to society.

Finally, play is not just something libraries help their communities to do - it is something that library staff should also do, when preparing for the future.

We saw four examples from different countries, practical examples of librarians playing and experimenting to make their services even better, but now I want to zoom out and take in the very biggest picture of all: playing as a strategy for the future of library institutions.

There's a phrase used at Oxford University's Saïd Business School: they talk about "TUNA conditions".

That is to say, conditions which are Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel, and Ambiguous.

You can find TUNA conditions in so many aspects of the human experience right now. Our relationship to the media, propaganda, and so-called "fake news". The changing climate. The financial sector, which experienced a massive crisis with lasting political, social, and economic consequences.

Think about how these conditions affect the future of public libraries. A library leader is planning their strategy for the next five years. They expect a certain budget from the government, and certain structures to be in place to support the library service. The global financial crisis rocks the markets and national economies worldwide. Government budgets are affected, and the money that was expected for the library will now not arrive. People lose their jobs or homes, or simply find themselves in financially difficult circumstances, less able to buy books and movies and music, so they need the library more. The pressure on the institution increases even as budgets decline - yet this would have been hard to predict, that high risk mortgages in the United States would cause such deep and powerful ripples.

Indeed, would you argue that the consequences of the crisis extend even to a deep social dissatisfaction which has encouraged the rise of the far right wing and violent, aggressive political extremism? Conventional strategic planning cannot predict these turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous conditions.

That's why the leaders of today require a kind of play when looking towards the future. This is what we call scenario planning. Instead of trying to predict and control the world to come, organisations constructed multiple scenarios - plausible pictures of what might happen in the future.

These don't need to be accurate predictions - they need to be useful and plausible ones, showing us the potential conditions we might want to prepare for or to test our plans against. Could we

cope if there is another crisis? What would the library do if the political environment changes? What should the library prepare for as the natural environment and the climate changes?

I recently worked with a library in the United States which was preparing to redevelop its building, which had opened in the year 2000.

When it was being planned, Boris Yeltsin was still the leader of Russia. There were no smartphones, so nobody realised how many power sockets the building would need. They were prepared for a world of disc media, not streaming services and cloud uploads. And the world had never heard "Who Let The Dogs Out?"

Our libraries face futures that are also hard to imagine. Those future libraries will look back at us and laugh a little bit, just as we can laugh at the librarians of 1999, who had no idea how many people would want to plug in their tablets and smartphones and laptops at the library tables.

And we probably can't predict the future, but we can do what children do, and enter the land of make-believe, rehearsing and playing, experimenting and anticipating.

Play is the single most important thing that libraries do - whether we do it with children, families or adults; with physical or digital media, with books or board games or roleplay or 3D printers; whether we do it by letting our own community play and explore, or by experimenting with our own services, or even at the political, strategic level as we prepare for the future of our society.

It is the single most important thing that libraries do - and today and tomorrow, [Re]Pensar attendees have a unique and valuable opportunity to explore the topic for themselves with international experts, friends, and guides.

So welcome to the future. Let's play.