

# Playful Times – Exploring World ... PHEW!

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The future of (higher) education needs to be actively ‘played with.’ After all, only a diverse, well-thought-out and future-oriented education system will be able to meet the challenges of the digital age.<sup>1</sup> *Diverse* in this context is defined as interdisciplinary, multi-perspective and transversal.<sup>2</sup> *Well-thought-out* means applying concentration and critical reflection, but also establishing one’s own points of view, admitting (and learning from) mistakes and integrating new sources and content. *Future-oriented* means thinking about parameters that are not yet fixed: a system of this kind shapes personalities and humanity, encourages collaborative thinking, and does so with with a great deal of empathy and sensibility.<sup>3</sup>

Picturing and discussing education in this way points to factors inherent in artistic, creative and cultural modes of practice, as art and culture – the

1 Here, we refer on the one hand to what Felix Stalder has termed the “culture of digitality,” referring to mechanisms that significantly shape our culture beyond ‘0 and 1’ (cf. Stalder, 2016). On the other hand, we are inspired by Armin Nassehi’s articulation of a theory of digital society in which the digitization process is not primarily or exclusively defined by technology, but by a systemic change in our society (cf. Nassehi, 2019).

2 Cf. Mateus-Berr, in this volume.

3 The Center for E-Learning at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) understands education to be a collaborative act, sees itself as a driver for future-oriented university didactics, and sets new standards for teaching and learning concepts both nationally and internationally. At the ZHdK, e-learning stands for more than just electronic learning: it is a multifaceted concept in the charged area between experimental, extended, engaged, equal, epic and endless learning – and thus a teaching concept that works both syneasthetically and (in a playful way) digitally, in a hybrid way, and on-site. Moreover, it allows for explorative experimentation (cf. ZHdK, 2021a).

social avant-garde<sup>4</sup> – both promote education and influence it with that same vision. Moreover, the ‘digital university’<sup>5</sup> as described by Oliver Ruf is to be pursued and co-designed along these lines.

The special feature of the digital university lies here once again in a paradoxical undertaking. For, as is to be illustrated, the emphasis is on a form that is specifically aesthetic. [It] is a matter of what is not obvious at first glance: of explicitly ascribing attributes of the sensory to its digitalization and, in doing so, not neglecting them.\*<sup>6</sup>

This essay posits a thesis or, rather, a call to action: the education system of the future is one that is both highly philosophical and greatly impacted by artistic developments. In order to want to remain proactive, it should adapt methods and concepts from the creative sector. Indeed, interest in the relevance of the creative sector goes beyond the field of education: particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, discourse around arts and culture brought increasing calls to recognize the creative sector as ‘system-relevant,’ thereby highlighting its importance for society:<sup>7</sup>

Culture is an essential necessity of society. As Aristotle’s *Poetics* notes in its definition of tragedy, it serves to effect catharsis in people, unleashing affect in its mirroring of the conditions of life. In the process, culture serves to broaden perspectives on one’s own life.\*<sup>8</sup>

As such, future-oriented higher education didactics must consider the creative sector the key to a future-oriented society, employing design processes similar to those embraced by ‘planet-centric design’ to connect to a commu-

4 The concept of avant-garde can also be read as an awakening or departure from that which came before. It implies a manifest mood of new beginnings that does not provide a set of rules, but calls and inspires without already knowing the benefits. It gives rise to new, agile ways of being or working together. The word ‘avant-garde’ is often used interchangeably with ‘innovation,’ as both imply courageously bringing together constellations that had previously seemed impossible. The avant-garde can also point to social change (see avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Bauhaus or Dadaism), though we will not be elaborating on underlying ethical principles here, nor does this essay address the ways in which they were (in some cases) interpreted retrospectively by individual avant-garde currents or representatives. Members of the avant-garde emerge in or after crises and use them to test and establish radical, fearless approaches.

5 Cf. Ruf, 2021.

6 Ibid., pp. 45–46.

7 Cf. Annual Report ZCCE, 2020.

8 Skipis, 2021.

nity that both takes shape and allows itself to be shaped, integrates the environment in which it lives and foregrounds it as a subject of consideration. The aim must be to help create a future worth living, and to do so in a thoughtful, self-determined way. “Planet-centric design is a dramatic shift in perspective. We need to move from egoism to ecosystems.”<sup>9</sup>

The present essay offers a model, which we call PHEW and which can be used to support this call and sort the resulting theoretical connectivity. PHEW is a ludic, design-based, agile and inclusive ‘superpower’ concept that builds on basic elements of artistic, design and cultural practice of action as a starting point for new teaching-learning concepts and social issues. PHEW is complemented by a location-independent and mobile laboratory implementation method<sup>10</sup> that directly tests the mechanism of *explorative experimentation*.<sup>11</sup> As we have described our model’s investigative mode elsewhere: “PHEW stands for playful learning, which takes place in all kinds of hybrid settings (spanning from the analogue to the digital), taking an easily accessible, inclusive approach, and featuring the reflective and nurturing elements of a walkabout.”<sup>12</sup>

9 Huber, 2021.

10 Our laboratory approach derives from notions first developed at the Bauhaus. In 1919, Bauhaus founder and director Walter Gropius sought to merge disciplines of art and craft together at his Weimar art academy. The underlying idea flows, among other things, into the *Propädeutikum* [propaedeutic], as the preliminary design course at the ZHdK is called (ZHdK, 2021d). It prepares prospective students for studies in design and art in a trial-like studio situation, guiding them in a ‘safe space’ that allows for reorientation. The Center for E-Learning abstracts and translates this laboratory idea into a moving, discovery-oriented laboratory situation – similar to the concept of using a ‘design bus’ to enable a mobile experience of one’s study journey (cf. <https://www.designbus.ch/> [16 Dec. 2021]). The protected, safe framework of a laboratory-like field of experimentation can also be found in the culture of so-called ‘magic circles’: this concept refers to a symbolic space within which a game evolves in which the normal rules, role attributions and realities of the world are suspended and replaced by the artificial reality of a game world (cf. Salen & Zimmermann, 2004).

11 Here we refer to the term as defined by Friedrich Steinle, who distinguishes the explorative from the theoretical experiment (Steinle, 2005). Going further, we also speak of an *explorative experiment*, otherwise known as an *explorative experiment* or *pilot study*. It “aims at broadening the basis for hypotheses or acquiring general experience”\* (KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, 2021).

12 Kocher & Axelsson, 2021.

### Ludic Interventions

We see the superpower concept PHEW as a particularly exciting and goal-oriented measure with the potential to highlight skills and motifs including tolerance (in the sense of ambiguity tolerance), error culture, independent thinking and an explorative attitude in teaching practice; to promote the development of (changing) communities in project work; and to elaborate, present, reflect and revise this development in an iterative process.

PHEW is based on a strategy that can be understood as a *ludic intervention*: periods of uncertainty show the helpfulness of approaches with the ability to realign deterministic, planned-out, and ‘inside-the-box’ thinking. There is a growing need for methods that are chance-driven, out-of-context, and engaging – methods that question, re-discuss, tentatively swap and redefine social norms and roles. The (after)effects of artistic methods that would not have been alien to such socio-political and art-political movements as Fluxus or Dadaism are especially keenly felt in Zurich as a cultural melting pot; the past 30 years have seen these strategies repeatedly gaining a new foothold in subversive global movements including guerilla marketing, guerilla gardening, hacker culture and the protest scene.

The fact that games are inextricably interwoven with politics, society, and anthropology has been described, analyzed, and deconstructed in various ways since time immemorial. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the Roman poet Juvenal coined the term *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses) to describe political rulers’ strategy of distracting people from social grievances with a grain dole and spectacular staged events.<sup>13</sup> In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Schiller praised the play instinct as an immanently aesthetic category of being human: “For, to mince matters no longer, man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in the late 1930s, Johan Huizinga defined what he termed *Homo ludens*,<sup>15</sup> or the playful, play-minded human being, as he understood *play* to be a fundamental building block of culture per se. Game studies research initially defined *play*, which follows its own set of rules and is detached from external functional contexts, in terms of *agon* [ancient Greek ἀγών for struggle, competition, contest] – a reflection of the zeitgeist at the time. Con-

13 Cf. for example the novel as well as the movie “The Hunger Games,” 2008.

14 Schiller, 1795, p. 88.

15 Cf. Huizinga, 1938.

sequently, in the 1960s, Roger Caillois saw it as influenced in equal measure by *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*.<sup>16</sup> Play as defined by the forces of competition, chance, masquerade/role-playing, and stupor/intoxication lends itself to very different forms and contexts of meaning, and offers more room for the subversive – in education and in culture.

### From Gamification to Playification

When we talk about exploring a diverse, well thought-out and future-oriented education system with ludic methods, this means that we adapt functionalities and mechanics usually associated with the game system to what was originally a non-game context. This in no way refers to gamification strategies, which – often serving the marketing sector – use relatively short-term measures such as points, badges, tokens, rankings, etc. to convert extrinsic motivation into intrinsic motivation, thereby leading users to participate in largely pleasure-free contexts: “Hot on the heels of that is the number of people still selling ‘quick win’ solutions and ‘magic bullets’ off the back of the word ‘gamification.’ Promising to solve any and all problems a client may have with a simple plugin offering points and badges.”<sup>17</sup> PHEW envisions a different way of working and a different learning and teaching atmosphere: Participants are surprised and challenged, and enjoy fun and sustainable involvement in the learning process. Consequently, PHEW refers to *playification* instead of *gamification*. Humans learn by *playing* and therefore strive for a kind mindset similar to what Brian Sutton Smith notes in his descriptions of the ‘lusory attitude’,<sup>18</sup> which is often forgotten in adult culture: “When you are an adult you don’t stop learning through play, you just stop playing.”<sup>19</sup> The goal of PHEW is logically to make this play instinct fruitful for the future of education.

### PHEW in Action

Ludic interventions in teaching – taking *video conferencing* as an example – can take the form of personal, thematic, engaging check-ins. Framing is essential here, as it creates a personal, motivating work atmosphere. Introductory questions such as “What did you do for the very first time this week?” or “Show us your socks and tell us a little story!” can be simple but subtle course-set-

16 Cf. Caillois, 1967.

17 Marczewski, 2021.

18 Cf. Sutton-Smith, 2009.

19 Waters, 2014.

ting cues for developing a motivated, mindful learning community. Equally important is the process of exiting the interaction: check-outs such as “Before you go, tell us exactly one word that sums up the essence of the seminar for you” can playfully end a video conference call and also give cause to reflect.

In general, elements of ludic didactics<sup>20</sup> can contribute to cognitive activation or add depth to material presented in class. Whether guiding a theoretical discussion with questions chosen with a roll of dice or drawing lots for active roles within a particular class session (one person gives feedback; another formulates critique; another gives input; another observes quietly but attentively, etc.), *random design* can help refigure stalled structures or predictable processes. Quizzes and voting rounds are ludic elements already in use in the classroom, and many more can be added to them.

A more complex example is “Creative Encounter,” an online course co-developed by the ZHdK’s Center for E-Learning, its Digital Skills & Spaces program and the ZHdK Center for Continuing Education, which has been implemented several times since 2020.<sup>21</sup> Similar to an advent calendar, the online learning platform PAUL gives participants access to a new video contribution by a ZHdK expert every morning for a period of ten weekdays. The video illustrates a creative method and explains the day’s task: for example, inventing stories by looking at stains, crafting wheels of fortune to be used as decision-making machines, generating new meanings from pages of text, or making paint from moss to offset CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Participants share and discuss their results and approaches in an online forum. The course, which is aimed at creative-curious individuals from all walks of life, is a kind of digital walkabout. It also constitutes a short journey to the inner creative self, a facet that (like the play instinct) many adults tend to neglect. Creative Encounter’s recipe for success is creative empowerment with playful tasks and exchange within a small, protected community.

### **Identities, Agency and Interventions as Future-Oriented Competence Clusters**

PHEW is more than a model; it is an experimental system that takes a movement as its point of departure and explores, elaborates and evaluates sub-

20 Cf. ZHdK, 2021c.

21 Cf. ZHdK, 2021b.

ject matter within that movement.<sup>22</sup> Facilitated by exploratory experiment, PHEW enables different ways of thinking about teaching and the finding of new solutions. With this in mind, we propose three competence clusters that we will explore using PHEW in the *mobile laboratories* known as “Experimental Learning Labs,” but also want to both challenge and encourage in the future.

The three clusters *Identity*, *Agency* and *Intervention* are fields borrowed from the creative sector; taking a playful approach to these systematics can support teaching across disciplines. With this structure, we invite everyone to develop a future-oriented lesson with us:

Adopt a creative, formative attitude; be aware of the environment in which you operate – not reacting to it in any reverent way, but with a bit of ‘deliberate oblivion,’ meaning playful and unbiased. Link your context with others, adapt outside methods and content, and merge it all with your own experience and presence.\*<sup>23</sup>

**Identities** and the related manifestations in physical, hybrid and virtual spaces. It is here that personality is shaped and a future-oriented ecosystem built. Keywords: world, performance, (re)presentation, dramaturgy, identity, artificial intelligence, social roles, social media, virtual reality/augmented reality, avatars

**Agency** means the ability of actors to act in or with a particular environment. Keywords: activation, playful modes of action and digital skills, leadership, immersion, creativity, error culture, resilience

**Interventions** mean engaged interventions for a playable future; these build sustainable competencies, including the competence to think about, envision and create the future. An intervention is an agile system that is both self-reflective and open to reflection.

Keywords: ethics, digital sustainability, inclusion in digital space, learning culture, value discourse, action-based learning/peer learning/guerrilla learning

22 Cf. Klenk, 2020.

23 Axelsson, 2020, p. 22.

In conclusion, our approach supports the following ‘mission statement’ to make the arts ‘playful’ so that others might enjoy them:

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Currently, many institutions and companies are looking for new answers, a change of perspective, and increasingly want to include the view of future generations in their work. As part of a large, multidisciplinary art university and after many years of research, we know the specifics, potentials and impact of the arts for other fields.<sup>24</sup>

Our search for a change of perspective is guided by the fundamental question of successful scholarly communication: how can we manage the transfer and translation work in such a way that both our ludic approach and artistic mindset reach a broader public? – PHEW! A challenge we love to tackle.

24 Bossow, 2021.

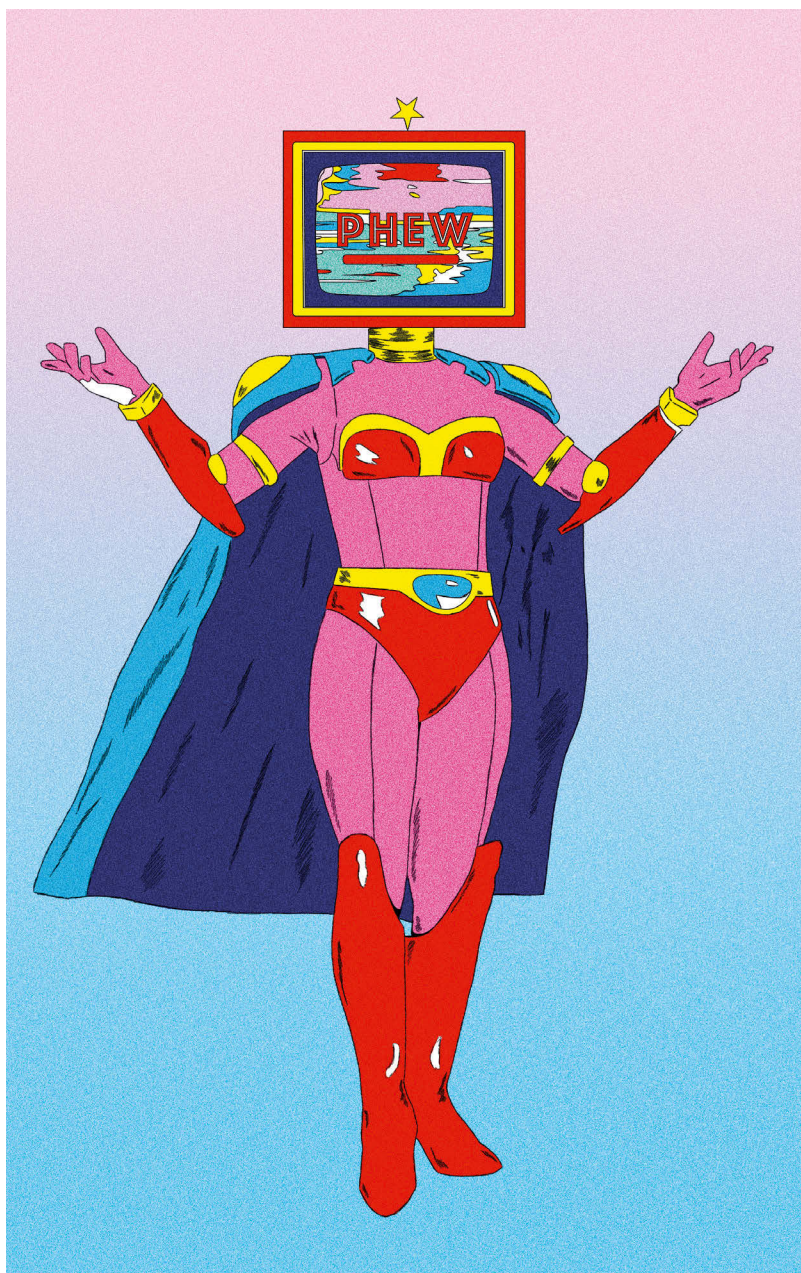


Fig. 1

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### Figures

Fig. 1: PHEW model by Marie Mohanna.



