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Serious Play: Campus Humor in Precarious Times

Kevin Howley

This article explores the use of humor in the context of multiple crises in higher education. Specifically, I examine recent instances of campus humor – understood here as a pragmatic, underutilized, and underappreciated approach to crisis intervention. Simply put, I contend humor is an effective, if contested, coping strategy for beleaguered faculty, staff, and students. Furthermore, I argue that the cultural work of producing campus humor, especially in such precarious times, is a slyly subversive form of play within the corporatized university. Throughout, I demonstrate how these humorous interventions are relevant to Adaptation Studies, broadly conceived, to include mediated as well as social and institutional adaptations to a state of crisis in higher education.

The article is organized as follows: first, I situate this discussion in relation to scholarship on the use of humor in crisis intervention, political communication, and workplace settings. Doing so, I want to suggest that campus humor of the sort considered here is best understood as a form of “serious play” (Heldal, Dehlin and Oddane). Next, I present three case studies of humorous media on a residential liberal arts campus. The cases examine discrete but highly intertextual and interdiscursive forms of mediated humor – Internet memes, parodic video, and a satirical essay – to address campus crises before and during the pandemic. Each case describes the context surrounding the humorous intervention, as well as its conception, production and distribution.

Following this, I briefly consider how, when taken together, these case studies highlight a process of “transmedia adaptation” (Heredia-Torres; Lopez Szwydky) to the university in crisis. Significantly, my analysis diverges from studies focused on the adaptation of a particular narrative across media platforms, or on transmedia storytelling as such. Rather, my interest lies with identifying a “structure of feeling” (Williams) articulated by the serious play at work in these humorous interventions. In this way, I want to make the case for adopting serious play as a viable alternative to both the official discourse and policy prescriptions of university boards of trustees, campus administrators and their hired hands – so-called educational consultants – whose market-oriented and increasingly autocratic approach to problem solving devalues professional educators (Spinrad and Relles), degrades higher education (Dyson), and diminishes the university’s role in creating and sustaining a democratic culture (Giroux).

As the producer of the material discussed herein, I employ a reflexive participant observation method of analysis (Gauntlett 74-75). Feedback in the form of email correspondence, text messages, and reader/viewer comments provides some, albeit limited insight into the reception of these humorous interventions. The article concludes with some thoughts on the value of play and humor as adaptation strategies in response to cascading crises in higher education.

From Crisis to Campus Humor

The use of humor in crisis intervention work routinely focuses on the therapeutic value of laughter for dealing with acute depression, suicidal ideation, or traumatic stress. In an emergency, a counselor, social worker, or first responder may use humor with clients contending with stressful situations. Pollio advocates for such an approach but recommends therapists be conscious of both the constructive and destructive potential of humor in crisis intervention. Humor may be useful for defusing crisis situations; but if the humor fails, therapists may need to repair the breach. Likewise, Pollio suggests that scholars and practitioners consider the value and efficacy of different types of humor – joking, mimicry, and irony – used in crisis intervention work.

Finally, there’s the matter of whether or not humor is appropriate in any given circumstance. “Thus,” Pollio argues, “humor is situational; not all individuals viewing the same situation will perceive humor in it” (377). The decidedly mixed reaction to the campus humor discussed below confirms this observation. Regardless, for Pollio the benefits outweigh the risks. If humor fails, the therapist must work to reestablish the client’s trust. But if humor succeeds, it can be an effective strategy for crisis intervention and is especially useful for “reframing the context of the problem situation” (378). The case studies presented below highlight precisely this aspect of campus humor in crisis intervention work.

Typically, crisis intervention efforts in school settings focus on matters of life and death: rapid responses to natural disasters, gun violence, tragic accidents and sudden deaths. The crises discussed throughout this article are of a different order – best described as institutional, epistemic, political, and economic in nature (Blumenstyk). Put differently, while campus politics frequently resembles a blood sport, there’s no physical violence to persons or property in the case studies presented below.

Nonetheless, the crises confronting colleges and universities have enormous consequences for independent thought and critical inquiry: cornerstones of higher learning, and prerequisites for a healthy democratic society (Giroux). It is here, then, that we can appreciate humor’s potential for intervening in campus politics – just as it does in the broader political sphere (Davisson and Donavan, Day 1-11). The memes deployed in the GOTV campaign described below illustrate precisely this point.

Bebić and Volarevic argue that Internet memes are neither silly nor frivolous cultural artifacts but rather work to engage publics in political issues and debates. Reviewing scholarship on memes and political communication, they note that memes can be quite serious, despite the reservoir of popular culture they draw upon to make their point. Tay contends memes operate at “the intersection of pleasure-driven play and genuine political discourse” (46). What Tay describes as

LOLitics – “the combination of Internet memes and political humor” (47) – is especially germane to this discussion, and to broader concerns about the relationship between work and play in academia (Humphrey) and business (Buehler).

Thus, the playfulness of memes in particular, and humor more generally, obscures the serious political work it performs. We can see this in contemporary instances of pandemic humor. For instance, Ceuterick argues that humor in the face of the pandemic’s disruption to both the professional and domestic sphere is emblematic of an “affirmative politics” (896) surrounding gendered power relations on the job and in the home. Incidentally, laughter in the time of COVID is not unique to Western society; the *Journal of African Media Studies* published a special issue titled, “Deadly Serious: Pandemic Humour, Media and Critical Perspectives” (Bernal).

Likewise, the timeless, cross-cultural appeal of satirical humor hinges, in large measure, on its political character and utility. Glatch reminds us: “Satire must criticize a specific action, belief or institution. It must poke holes in the logic of those actions, beliefs, or institutions without ever explicitly stating the humor.” Of course, there are important distinctions between Horatian satire, which pokes gentle fun at human foibles and failings, and Juvenalian satire’s decidedly political edge aimed at critique of authority figures and social institutions (Glatch). The satirical essay discussed below operates in the Juvenalian tradition to reveal the cynicism of (corporate) academia’s collective response to the COVID crisis.

Given its therapeutic and political value, it comes as no surprise that humor proved to be an effective coping mechanism in response to the global pandemic (Nicholls). Harris finds parallels between laughter in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and humor emerging alongside the novel coronavirus. “Our country is again staggering, grieving and girding for exponentially larger loss. ... Comedy today is first responder for our souls, its arms around us as we collectively lose our sh—” (73-74).

Taking a longer historical perspective, Mada and Gomoescu examine “quarantine humor” (55) during the so-called Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919 and in the early days of the 2020 COVID lockdown. They argue quarantine humor does the important cultural work of relieving existential dread over sickness and death while providing a useful respite from more mundane matters of daily existence under quarantine. Aimed at assuaging the frustration college students felt when the pandemic scuttled their senior year festivities, the parodic video discussed below reveals dimensions of work and play in quarantine humor.

All of which is to suggest that campus humor of the sort under consideration here is a form of serious play. Statler, Heracleous and Jacobs define serious play as “a practice that occurs whenever organizational actors submit to a paradox of intentionality – that is, when people engage deliberately in a fun, intrinsically motivating activity as a means to achieve a serious, extrinsically motivated work objective” (237). The authors explore the ambiguity of serious play in which “playful behaviors” – such as producing Internet memes, parodic video, and satirical essays – are used in workplace settings for serious purposes (237). In the case studies that follow, I aim to illustrate precisely this aspect of serious play. Further, I hope to enrich understanding of, and renew appreciation for, the value of play and humor in a grimly serious (Bartlett) and decidedly unfunny academy (Romano).

For theorists, thinking about serious play in this way extends the explanatory power of this concept for organizational and behavioral studies. For my purposes, serious play is useful insofar as it suggests the utility of these work practices in promoting creative problem solving, fostering innovative thought, and encouraging candid appraisal of “specific organizational challenges” (Statler, Heracleous and Jacobs 250) – such as the no confidence vote at the center of the first case study – as well as the more banal, but no less important cultural work of adapting to the disruptions to higher learning caused by COVID-19 addressed in the second and third case studies.

Case Study #1: GOTV Memes

In Fall 2018, tensions between faculty and the administration at my home institution reached a fever pitch. A combination of fiscal mismanagement and declining enrollments prompted administrators to adopt austerity measures, including dramatic cuts to employee health coverage. University staff reported declining morale, and some faculty warned of administrative overreach and what they perceived as an assault on shared governance. Finally, the administration’s mishandling of a series of racially motivated hate crimes raised the stakes across the entire campus.

Throughout the fall, in regularly scheduled meetings and via the campus email system, faculty debated holding a vote of no confidence in the university president. Meanwhile, over 20 student organizations co-signed a letter to the editor of the campus newspaper, expressing a lack of confidence in the university’s leadership. By mid-November, faculty were poised to put the issue to a vote. Just ahead of the ballot, a splinter group of faculty authored a proposition titled “A Third Way.”

That memo, distributed via the campus email distribution list, urged faculty to abstain from the motion. Instead, the appeal called for mediation between various stakeholders. “A Third Way” advocates argued that a vote of no confidence would exacerbate tensions between the board and faculty, further demoralize the campus workforce, and potentially damage the institution’s reputation moving forward.

Thanks to the heroic efforts of my department colleague, the late Geoff Klinger, throughout the fall, the long dormant campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) began to stir. My dear friend and coworker served as chapter president, another colleague from the Department of History was vice-president, and I assumed the duties of secretary-treasurer. More important for my purposes here, I also served, albeit in an unofficial capacity, as the chapter’s director of strategic communication.

Accordingly, the local AAUP chapter did not issue a formal position on the no confidence referendum; instead we adopted an ad hoc communication strategy to get out the vote. In short order, we adopted a meme-based campaign designed to cut through the email chatter and official talking points to deliver tactical messages as the vote drew near. Thus, the GOTV campaign underscores the “the evolution of analog leaflet propaganda into its contemporary digital form of Internet memes” (Niebuurt 1).

With its connotation of political communication’s evolutionary adaptation in the digital era, Niebuurt’s observation has a two-fold relevance here. First, like their predecessor, the political leaflet, memes are useful in the moment: a relatively quick and easy way to communicate with mass publics. But in terms of digital affordances in labor costs, production time, speed and scale of distribution, Internet memes are, to sustain the evolutionary metaphor, further up the food chain than their analog antecedents. An ideal form of “tactical media” (Critical Art Ensemble), memes allow campaigners to reach audiences in a timely and effective fashion with pithy, pointed and occasionally persuasive messages. As the no confidence vote drew near, memes enabled GOTV campaigners to issue rapid responses to “A Third Way” proponents and, perhaps, sway faculty who might otherwise abstain from voting.

Second, the GOTV campaign’s appropriation of the “Matrix Morpheus” meme is emblematic of the adaptive strategies at work in this form of serious play (see Figure 1). Indeed, according to the website Know Your Meme, the character Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) never utters the phrase “What If I Told You?” in any of *The Matrix* installments. Nonetheless, the top line of the meme distills and reinterprets what is arguably the central plot point of the entire franchise: Morpheus’ disclosure to Neo (Keanu Reeves) that the world as he knows it is a computer simulation.



Figure 1: GOTV adaptation of the “Matrix Morpheus” meme.

In a similar vein, the GOTV adaptation diverges from “Morpheus Meme” derivatives (Shifman) insofar as it offers an affirmative, if ironic counterpoint to the meme’s more commonplace usage. The bottom line routinely delivers “a revelation that often belittles futile or petty behavior” as in, “What If I Told You; Hashtags on Facebook Do Nothing” (Know Your Meme). In contrast, ahead of the no confidence vote, the second line, “Shared Governance Was A Thing” asserts individual and collective agency in the wake of administrative efforts to avoid accountability and undermine faculty governance.

Put differently, rather than disparage or demean efforts to assert faculty sovereignty, this repurposing and reinterpretation of the “Morpheus Meme” affirms faculty autonomy, rights and responsibilities. Following Shifman, Voigts contends that memes are inextricably tied to cultural practices of appropriation and adaptation. Accordingly, the GOTV derivative demonstrates a “degree of change, manipulation, and participation” (286) central to the adaptive strategies inherent in the serious play of meme production and distribution.

Responses to the GOTV campaign varied. Some faculty welcomed the intervention with great enthusiasm, others complained that one-a-day memes crowded their in-boxes. One faculty member responded with a measure of sarcasm and unfounded claims of airing the university’s dirty laundry in public: “Please keep making and sharing these hilarious and intellectually stimulating graphics. I think they’re really helping our current situation, and they’re a great way to model civil discourse for our students” (Anon). It is unclear if the GOTV campaign influenced the outcome, but faculty approved the no confidence resolution by a vote of 83-59, with 64 abstentions, marking the first time in the institution’s history that faculty approved such a measure. Notwithstanding the university board of trustees’ subsequent statement reasserting its support, the embattled president stepped down at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year.

Postscript: In final days of the Spring 2019 semester, the university's chief information officer released the administration's plans, effective July 1st, to "introduce a new model for campus-wide staff and faculty email lists" (Smith). A new, opt-in "discuss" list would replace the faculty-staff distribution mechanism. Again, it is unclear what role, if any, the GOTV campaign played in this decision; but the coincidence is difficult to ignore.

Case Study #2: Senior Sendoff Video

On May 4, 2020, a memo from the Office of University Communications and Marketing – posted to the aforementioned "discuss" email distribution list – requested faculty and staff assistance ahead of the upcoming "virtual recognition ceremony" – a striking example of social and institutional adaptations to the pandemic – for graduating seniors. Citing the "especially difficult" time the senior class confronted amid the COVID-19 lockdown, the marketing department sought to collect user-generated "senior sendoff videos" – a subgenre of pandemic media culture – for distribution across the university's social channels in lieu of in-person farewells to graduates.

"It would really mean a lot to students and others as well," the request continued, "so please consider submitting a short video" (Bottom). The memo included links to production guidelines – formatting, running time, etc. – and a few examples gleaned from universities taking up similar efforts. The samples were predictable enough: well-meaning but rather saccharine messages of congratulations for newly minted graduates. Much as I empathized with the plight of seniors missing out on graduation rites of passage, I was in no mood to participate in the mawkish PR exercise.

Then I had second thoughts. Like many people, during the lockdown I split my time between online instruction, self-medicating, and binge-watching movies and television. On the later point, I was revisiting *Better Call Saul* and took inspiration from the lead character's DIY television ads. The result: a spoof commercial for a fictitious hospitality service catering to the pandemic class of 2020. Fresh from an online digital storytelling workshop sponsored by StoryCenter, I used the online platform WeVideo to produce an ironic counterpoint to the sobriety of senior sendoff videos that students might appreciate.

Embracing the low-budget aesthetics and hard sell tactics common to late-night TV commercials, I wrote, shot, and edited a parody adaptation of a law firm advertisement-cum-sendoff video in a single afternoon (see Figure 2). The script for the 30-second spot follows:

Seniors! Has this ever happened to you?

Commencement. Denied!

Graduation Party. Denied!

First job. Denied!

Hi, I'm Kevin Howley, professor of media studies. If COVID-19 has harshed your graduation buzz, have I got a deal for you!

For the low, low price of \$50, I'll come to your home and deliver a commencement address you're sure to forget.

Then, I'll chauffeur you and your date for a special night out. Be sure to practice social distancing.

I'll even throw in a bottle of cheap champagne, so you and your crew can get properly trashed!

Don't be denied the graduation you deserve!

Dial 1-800-CovidSux and we'll party like we wish it was 1999.

Gloves, masks and disinfectant not included. (Howley, Senior Send-off)



Figure 2: “Denied!” Opening image of the senior sendoff parody.

Akin to “subvertisements” (Dery) – subversively parodic advertisements produced by the likes of Adbusters, the long-running culture jamming magazine – this form of serious play relies on practices common to Adaptation Studies: intertextuality, appropriation, and discursive integration. As with any successful parody, intertextual references may be obscure, or familiar, probably both. For instance, the opening line poaches a recurrent piece of dialogue from the Netflix series *BoJack Horseman*, wherein Todd and Mr. Peanutbutter pitch their latest, increasingly ludicrous investment schemes with the question, “Has this ever happened to you?” In contrast, the closing line – “gloves, masks and disinfectant not included” – invokes instantly recognizable disclaimers common to TV ads for everything from legal services to pharmaceuticals. Finally, the shout-out to Prince’s party favorite, “1999,” is hard to miss.

While viewers may not be “in” on all of the intertextual references, the parody unmistakably appropriates the form and style of late-night TV ads. But as Julie Sanders reminds us, appropriation “moves far beyond intertextuality and introduces ideas of active critical commentary, of creative reinterpretation and of ‘talking back’ to the original” (1; emphasis added). Here, the critical commentary is not directed at low-budget television commercials. Rather the parody appropriates the aesthetic, stylistic and generic conventions of such advertisements in the service of a sly but unmistakable critique of the maudlin sentimentality at work in far more serious – read institutionally sanctioned – senior sendoff videos.

Finally, operating as a “discursively integrated” text (Baym), the parody remixes three discrete discourses: the shifty patter of television advertisements, the celebratory discourse of graduation season, and vital health communication at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown. In this way, the parody is emblematic of “recombinant appropriation” (Voigts) that encourages slyly subversive, sometimes transgressive cultural production: precisely the sort of serious play with language and discourse you might expect from an academic in search of meaning – and in need of a good laugh – during a global pandemic.

Prior to submitting the video to the marketing office, I offered friends and family a sneak peek. The response was overwhelmingly positive – lots of LOL and LMFAO texts – a sharp contrast to the feedback I received from university personnel, who offered a subtle but unmistakable rebuke of my efforts. “Sorry for the

delay,” wrote back the university marketer,” We’re looking for something a bit more like this” adding additional links to more earnest examples of the sendoff video (Bottom, “Re: Video project”). As one of my colleagues later noted, “I had a good chuckle with your [video]. What a surprise that the university passed on your contribution” (McCall).

Case Study #3: The Pandemic Pivot Playbook

In January 2021, The Chronicle of Higher Education announced the release of a new publication designed to “help academic leaders support their staff and faculty.” Titled “Burned Out and Overburdened” this collection of “essential reads” offers university administrators strategies for “navigating these stressful times” (“Burned Out”). Nearly a year into the pandemic, the Chronicle appeared to acknowledge the anger, frustration, and exhaustion of faculty and staff everywhere.

But upon closer examination the Chronicle seemed to be offering yet another administrative “fix” to the very same administrative “solutions” offered in its pages since the start of the pandemic. Indeed, it was plain to see that campus administrators across the nation were borrowing from the same playbook. From the time of the initial lockdown in Spring 2020, to talks of resuming in-person teaching in the Fall of 2021, a spate of high- and low-stakes institutional adaptations designed to mitigate the pandemic’s impact on teaching and learning were taxing an already overburdened (and underappreciated) educational workforce.

Meanwhile, with a new president at the helm and a hastily drawn strategic plan on the agenda, my home institution was bracing for a whirlwind of committee meetings, consultation sessions, and a crop of new programs and initiatives—atop already onerous service obligations that distract faculty from the essential work of classroom instruction. Predictably, none of this alleviates the burn out and exploitation of education workers described by the Chronicle.

When I first ran across the Chronicle’s email promotion, I scoffed at the cruel irony of it all. But the sales pitch stuck with me: “Professors are anxious and burned out. They’ve been pivoting. They’ve been juggling work and childcare. They’ve been worried – about COVID-19, the economy, social justice, the nation’s divisive political climate” (“Burned Out”). I made a note of it, and within a matter of days I had the peg for a satirical essay aimed squarely at the absurdity of corporate academia in the thrall of the donor class and its hired hands: educational consultants, the “disaster capitalists” (Klein) of higher education.

The essay is a fanciful account of a typical, albeit virtual faculty meeting in the midst of the pandemic, wherein I ridicule the hostile takeover of higher education by corporate interests (Mills). As the following excerpt demonstrates, “The Pandemic Pivot Playbook” appropriates and adapts discourse, common to the pages of The Chronicle of Higher Education, emanating from what I call “the administrative-donor-consultant complex.”

According to our new consultants – or rather, partners, as they prefer to be known – the university’s fiscal realignment will ensure classics remains enshrined in our curriculum for the foreseeable future. Give or take inevitable market fluctuations, persistent enrollment declines, prolonged global health emergencies and the odd financial exigency or two.

Our new partners at Inside Job, the higher-education consultancy firm founded just last year by our own Peevish Floss, former chairman of classics – nice pivoting, Peevish! – are eager to assist faculty and staff with all their pivot needs.

Missed an important deadline? Pivot to another committee. One that doesn’t take deadlines quite so seriously. Alienated students and alumni by selling the campus radio station to a right-wing militia? Pivot to selling MAGA swag in bulk. (Howley, Pandemic Pivot)

The essay offers further insight into textual, social and institutional adaptation strategies. Like the Internet memes and parodic video discussed above, the satire relies on intertextuality and interdiscursivity to cultivate critical insight and register resistant sensibilities. So too, the essay caricatures the awkward emergence of social norms in virtual meeting spaces, from speaking protocols and language use to matters of decorum. Indeed, the pandemic induced all manner of social and institutional adaptations, including the translation of in-person faculty meetings into digital assemblies. It all made excellent fodder for campus satire.

Equally important, the essay’s focus on organizational transformation strategies –austerity measures, fiscal realignment, and the attendant bureaucratic bloat – appropriates and caricatures the now dominant, market-oriented approach to higher learning that marks the contemporary university (Klinger 32-35). Finally, the essay draws upon and incorporates a wellspring of literary tropes and plot devices – character types, interpersonal conflicts, and institutional politics – common to the “campus novel” (e.g., Amis; Lodge; Smallwood) if not more anarchic college satires such as *Horsefeathers*, *Animal House*, and *Wonder Boys*. Another instance of recombinant appropriation, the “Pandemic Pivot Playbook” assumes, then quickly inverts the serious tone and business-like demeanor of that most cherished of university rituals – the faculty meeting. Thus, the satire adapts administrative talking points to talk back to the university’s managerial class.

Predictably, several publications declined my essay. The editor’s reply from Inside Higher Ed is emblematic of the rejection letters:

Thanks so much for sending the satiric article. We really wish we had better news, but we've discussed it among ourselves and regret to say that we don't plan to publish it. Unfortunately, we continue to receive such a flood of submissions and proposals each week, many of them quite good, that we're having to turn down many more pieces than we'd like. (Bray)

Happily, the editors of *Academe Blog*, the online supplement of AAUP’s *Academe Magazine*, appreciated my efforts, likening the essay’s tone and stance to Twitter’s Associate Deans (@ass_deans), the infamous parody account that routinely savages the corporate academy.

Informal feedback from campus colleagues suggests the satire’s critique hit its mark, as did the following comment posted to the blog:

Thank you! A brilliant parody of administrative language and a refreshing discovery of the hypocrisy embedded in the various texts of empowerment that our would-be leaders publish. I hope that more of our colleagues pay attention to the abuse of language and the trespasses against healthful communication by our oppressors. (Cope)

The common ground between these humorous interventions is, to borrow Birkholc’s useful phrase, a capacity for “playing with discourses.” Their playful re-production of social discourses works to “reveal their mechanisms and criticize the way that they function. This type of meta-discursive play remains a

particularly interesting subject within Adaptation Studies. A novel or a film can be seen as a kind of interdiscursive adaptation in terms of how it brings different kinds of discourses into relation” (Birkholc). The same holds true of the Internet memes, parodic video and satirical essay discussed above.

Put differently, this meta-discursive play performs the serious work of critically interrogating discourses common to the corporate university – fiscal responsibility, managerial authority, and productivity metrics – through sly recombination with discourses of Hollywood film, commercial television, public health communication, and the campus novel. Doing so, these humorous interventions register and articulate profound anxieties over the corporatization of higher education.

Why So Serious? Structures of Feeling in Transmedia Adaptation

To be clear, I make no claim to have employed a conscious, much less deliberate “transmedia strategy” (Heredia-Torres) in the conception, production and distribution of this material. Rather, I want to suggest that the impulse to produce such work, the desire to share it with friends and colleagues, and the will to deploy it in provocative fashion across a variety of media, forms, genres and styles taps into a “structure of feeling” about the relationship between work and play – especially, although not exclusively, in the context of the corporate university.

Williams describes structure of feeling in terms of the “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living” (68). Elsewhere, Williams (1977) describes the concept in terms of emergent tendencies and trends. With this in mind, we can discern a structure of feeling that inspires and informs this campus humor. The Internet memes, parodic video and satirical essay considered above challenge dominant ways of thinking about the “serious and significant” work of academic labor (Manz).

Importantly, this material didn’t develop in a vacuum; recalibrating the relationship between work and play is a growing cultural concern. For instance, since 2009 the US Play Coalition works with academic researchers, health professionals, and classroom teachers to promote the value of play at every stage of life. In 2021, the coalition’s annual conference sponsored a workshop just for college and university faculty titled “Professors at Play: Bringing Fun and Joy into Higher Education.” The promotional blurb for the event speaks directly to the value of serious play I advocate throughout this article: “While play and elementary education have a long and positive history, post-secondary education has largely remained an ivory tower of serious contemplation and humorless work” (US Play Coalition).

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that I presented a draft of this article at the 2022 Literature/Film Association meeting in New Orleans. The conference theme: “Work and Play.” All of which underscores two important points: First, the relationship between work and play has emerged as a topic of some concern in Adaptation Studies. Second, embracing serious play does more than alleviate disillusionment with the current state of higher education. It offers a prescription for addressing university crises with creativity, ingenuity and resilience.

In closing, I offer a few observations regarding the significance of serious play for personal health, campus politics, and the restoration of institutional integrity (see also Howley, Creativity). First and foremost, I can attest to the therapeutic value of producing this material. My creative labor was decidedly not a distraction from the campus and global health crises described above. Rather, I found serious play empowering in the wake of forces and conditions that frequently left me feeling powerless to affect meaningful change. In short, there is healing power in campus humor (Thomas, Roehrig and Yang).

Similarly, I am reminded that political mobilizations associated with satirical news and related strategies employing laughter, comedy, etc. do the important cultural work of sustaining communities of resistance (Reilly). In each instance of campus humor described above, I drew inspiration from my understanding of the playful dimensions (Meikle) of activist media practice: tactical media in the case of the GOTV campaign, culture jamming in the parodic video, and ironic activism in the satirical essay.

Finally, but most important, understanding campus humor as a form of serious play underscores the legitimacy of this approach in crisis intervention – one with significant implications for creating and sustaining a vibrant civic culture with humor (Rossing). All too often, this keen insight is lost on knowledge workers in the corporate university, who, as we have seen, tend to take themselves far too seriously; and who, regrettably, fail to appreciate serious challenges to shared governance, academic freedom, and a functioning democracy.

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