



Stardust Odyssey: City's Last Stand – Utilising Process Drama and Design-Based Research in Tabletop Game Workshops to Reimagine Active Citizenship in Thailand's Neoliberal Education Context

COLLECTION:
DESIGNS FOR
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CONCEPTUALIZING
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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the practical application of *Stardust Odyssey: City's Last Stand*, a tabletop game designed to support experiential learning about socio-economic inequality within Thailand's neoliberal education system. Anchored in Process Drama and Design-Based Research (DBR), the study explores how the game operates as an educational tool by analysing participants' engagement with its mechanics during workshop sessions. Conducted with university students, educators, workers, and welfare activists, the workshops demonstrate how interactive gameplay can foster critical dialogue about systemic injustice and prompt participants to consider alternative modes of civic engagement. Departing from purely conceptual approaches, this paper foregrounds the iterative process of game design, facilitation, and reflective analysis, positioning *Stardust Odyssey* as a compelling model for integrating participatory drama and game-based learning into educational practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thailand's deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities have been worsened by neoliberal policies, with the COVID-19 pandemic further exposing and intensifying these disparities. While social sciences have extensively analysed these issues, theatre and performance studies remain underexplored as tools for critical engagement and social change. This paper addresses this gap by examining how performance-based methodologies—particularly process drama—and Design-Based Research (DBR) can be integrated into game-based learning to foster dialogue on social justice and redefine active citizenship within the Thai neoliberal context.

This broader research project stems from my dual role as a performance studies scholar and art practitioner specialising in scriptwriting. In the initial phase, I employed performance studies to analyse public performances and media portrayals of various Thai social groups—including affluent celebrities, daily wage workers, salaried employees, youth, and university students—to examine how class and labour structures are represented and perceived. These findings informed the creation of *Stardust Odyssey: City's Last Stand* (*Stardust Odyssey*), a fictional tabletop game that translates complex socio-economic issues into an interactive learning experience.

Set in a distant galaxy, the resource-management game mirrors real-world challenges in Thailand—such as inequality, environmental degradation, and governance failures—through its mechanics and scenarios. Players assume predefined roles with specific constraints and goals, navigating crises and negotiating outcomes that shape the game's evolving narrative. While individual success is possible, the game also emphasises the potential for collective achievement, underscoring the value of equitable access to public goods through cooperation.

While this initial design phase provides important context, it is not the main focus of this paper. Rather, this paper examines how the game is developed and utilised as an educational tool through iterative workshops, foregrounding the role of process drama and Design-Based Research (DBR) in shaping gameplay and participant engagement. By analysing workshop outcomes and participant reflections, the study explores how semi-structured play facilitates critical thinking, collaborative decision-making, and reflections on systemic inequality.

Drawing on scholars such as Solga (2019), who advocate for creative pedagogies that challenge neoliberal educational frameworks, this paper positions the *Stardust Odyssey* workshops as experimental spaces where participants rehearse dialogue and reimagine civic responsibility beyond dominant neoliberal logics. In doing so, *Stardust Odyssey* integrates process drama techniques with Brechtian distancing (*Verfremdungseffekt*) to cultivate both critical distance and deep engagement. The game's structure enables players to shift fluidly between role-playing, reflection, and out-of-character

discussion, periodically prompting them to analyse their choices and connect them to real-world inequalities. Facilitators support this process through the use of teacher-in-role, improvisation, and narrative framing to guide critical reflection.

DBR plays a crucial role in refining the game's mechanics and pedagogical framework, with iterative playtesting and participant feedback informing continuous adjustments to role-play structures, facilitation techniques, and debriefing processes. This paper explores two key questions: How can process drama facilitate critical engagement with socio-economic inequality? and How does the iterative development of *Stardust Odyssey*, through DBR and process drama, foster active citizenship and challenge neoliberal ideologies?

Ultimately, this research reimagines process drama and game-based learning in Thai education, advocating for active, performative citizenship over passive civic engagement. *Stardust Odyssey* serves as a tool for collective inquiry and social critique, extending beyond the classroom to engage broader communities in discussions on inequality, governance, and justice. It demonstrates how theatre, performance, and gaming can act as catalysts for gradual social transformation.

2. CONTEXTS AND FRAMEWORKS

2.1 CONTEXTS

Active Citizenship and Active Learning and in Thai Education

In Thailand, active citizenship is formally defined by the Office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education (2019) as fostering global-minded individuals who adhere to societal norms, customs, and laws. This aligns with the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council's (2017) 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan, which envisions "complete Thai citizens" contributing to societal well-being while maintaining physical and mental health. However, this top-down approach emphasises compliance with predefined roles rather than critical engagement with systemic inequalities, reflecting Freire's (1996) critique of the "banking model" of education, where students passively receive knowledge instead of actively constructing it.

Although active learning was introduced to address these limitations, it often remains instrumentalised, prioritising skill development over critical consciousness. While this shift echoes Dewey's (1938) advocacy for experiential, student-centred learning, Hopkins (2019) argues that excessive focus on measurable outcomes risks reducing education to performance-driven exercises rather than transformative learning. Freire (1996) and Alexander (2008) argues that true active learning must foster dialogue, where students and teachers engage in a reciprocal process, linking personal experience to collective action.

In the post-COVID-19 context, calls for educational reform in Thailand have intensified. Wasi (2021), for example, advocates for active learning not only beyond rote memorisation but also through the development of skills aligned with market demands. While this perspective offers valuable insights, I argue that it may inadvertently reinforce neoliberal educational models, in which learning is framed primarily in terms of economic productivity rather than social responsibility.

This study aims to redefine active citizenship and active learning as a critical interrogation of power structures rather than passive civic awareness. By integrating active learning into a participatory tabletop game, it explores how art and drama interventions can foster critical engagement with socio-economic inequalities in Thailand. Through *Stardust Odyssey* workshops, participants examine power dynamics, social roles, and agency, aligning with Freire's (1996) and Alexander's (2008) vision of education as a critical practice for confronting oppression.

2.2 FRAMEWORKS

Process Drama

Unlike scripted performances, which follow a fixed narrative, process drama emphasises experiential learning and personal engagement. Participants fluidly shift between playing a role and analysing it, maintaining awareness of both their character's identity and their own real-world perspectives. Process drama structures this interplay, allowing individuals to navigate between real and imagined worlds, engage in moral dilemmas, and sustain analytical distance (O'Neill, 1995; Heathcote, 2013; Eriksson, 2022).

Freebody (2022: 9–17) reflects on the assumptions and tensions within the field, questioning the often unexamined belief that drama inherently leads to positive social change, especially across different cultural contexts. She emphasises the need for drama educators to critically assess the type of change they aim to achieve and for whom, rather than uncritically assuming that drama always empowers or promotes justice. In *Stardust Odyssey*, process drama is essential for balancing reason and emotion during gameplay to be a rehearsing space to tackle socio-economic inequality in Thailand.

Unlike digital games, which rely on coded mechanics, a tabletop role-playing game functions as a shared performative space, emphasising embodied experiences and collective meaning-making, where knowledge is transmitted through the body and embodied experiences reveal power dynamics and social structures (Taylor, 2003; Shapiro, 2015). To integrate both embodied engagement and critical distance, I have deliberately designed the game to combine emotional storytelling and role-playing while allowing players to step back and reflect as themselves at any time using Brechtian distancing techniques.

Emotional Engagement

The narrative immersion and emotional engagement in tabletop games allow players to form deep emotional connections with their characters, shaping their decisions and responses throughout the game (Naul & Liu, 2020). Arnaudo (2018) highlights how modern board games enhance storytelling by incorporating uncertainty, personal goals, and progressive revelation.

Stardust Odyssey integrates this dynamic by assigning each character unequal resources at the start of the game, with each having a distinct preset personal goal while still allowing players the flexibility to shape their journey through their decisions (Table 1). For example, the Backpacker's goal of unlocking a "Dust Shelter" card serves as a metaphor for the financial struggles faced by Thai salaried workers in securing housing mortgages. While players controlling the same character may share the same goal, their experiences and challenges vary based on their decisions and emotional engagement. A player might empathise with others and choose actions that delay their own progress, or the revelation of backstory elements through the People Cards could unexpectedly influence their choices.

Brechtian Distancing

Political turmoil and socio-economic struggles in Thailand have long been embedded in everyday life. The recent military coups in 2006 and 2014 delayed socio-economic development and caused widespread distress, with many activists arrested or exiled, while economic inequality widened. After the pandemic, students are increasingly burdened with tuition fee debts (Thai PBS, 2024a), daily wage workers committed suicide due to

CHARACTER	START: HEALTH	START: STARDUST (GAME CURRENCY)	START: VOICE	START: BODY	START: MEMORY	PERSONAL GOAL
Stars Collectors	5	0	7	7	7	Unlock "My life as a Musical" Card
Backpackers	5	0	1	3	3	Unlock "Dust Shelter" Card
Stars Catchers	5	0	4	1	1	Unlock "Rising-Stars Influencer Awards" Card
Dust Cleaners	5	0	1	1	1	Unlock "Happy Dusty Land" Card

Table 1 Pre-assigned resources and goals for each character.

increasing household debts (Thai PBS, 2024b), while wealthy celebrities publicly flaunt their excess affluence. This realistic backdrop from my initial research finding at the first phase could be stressful to handle by players if directly transferred into the game.

To prevent players from becoming fully emotionally immersed, *Stardust Odyssey* incorporates Brechtian techniques, particularly *Verfremdungseffekt* (distancing/estrangement). Brecht (1961) emphasised the importance of disrupting passive emotional absorption, urging audiences to critically engage with performances rather than simply consuming them. Eriksson (2022) argues that Brechtian distancing is often misunderstood as emotional detachment. He clarifies that distancing is not about emotional disconnection but rather a means of disrupting habitual thought patterns and dominant narratives.

Similarly, Shklovsky's (1988) concept of *ostranenie* suggests that art should defamiliarise the world, compelling individuals to see everyday structures in a new light. Heathcote and Bolton (1995), pioneers in drama pedagogy, explored these ideas into educational theatre, introducing "metaxis"—the ability to exist simultaneously in real and fictional worlds.

By aligning Brechtian distancing with process drama, *Stardust Odyssey's* gameplay is designed to ensure that players are not only immersed in the game world but also serve as critical observers of the socio-economic structures embedded within it, fostering active citizenship. As Eriksson asserts:

Within the tradition of *Verfremdung* in educational drama and theatre, there is an obvious political, theatrical, and epistemological potential. This potential for playing, reflection, and action is significantly associated with the topos of distancing.... Thus, I contend, process drama can be productively applied as a vehicle for stimulating change. (2022: 28)

The storyline and setting of *Stardust Odyssey* mirror real socio-political conditions while maintaining a fictional distance that fosters critical engagement. The game takes place in a distant galaxy, where players assume the fictional roles of characters such as *Star Collectors*, *Dust Cleaners*, *Backpackers*, and *Star Catchers*, which symbolically represent Thai celebrities, daily wage workers, salaried employees, youth, and university students, respectively. While the game is set in an undefined future, its crises and elements—such as environmental disasters like Dust Storms and the Dust Crisis from Event cards, the Canned-Clean Air Courier, and the unequal distribution of inherited resources at the beginning of the game—reflect real-world challenges in contemporary Thailand, including the COVID-19 pandemic, PM2.5 air pollution, job precarity, and class disparities.

This design choice mirrors Brecht's use of historical settings to critique contemporary power structures—as exemplified in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, written in 1939, which critiques war economies and exposes how profit-seeking behaviours sustain violence. Similarly, *Stardust Odyssey* encourages players to critically examine how socio-economic inequalities and operate within their own society. The game narratives provoke reflection and critique, rather than passive participation.

Another key approach, informed by Brecht's epic theatre, is the multiple-roles technique, where an actor plays multiple characters to encourage detachment and perspective shifts, fostering critical awareness rather than full immersion in a single role. In *Stardust Odyssey*, this is achieved through read-aloud elements involving non-playable characters (NPCs). Instead of solely embodying their main character, players can step into different roles throughout the game, reinforcing Brechtian distancing and critical engagement. Although, this distancing process was employed to allow Thai players to distance themselves from the distressing tensions in the country. The gameplay, set in an unknown galaxy, amplifying the neoliberal context, can be adapted for use in broader contexts.

Critical Process Drama: AAAAAH Model

To further ensure critical engagement, the workshops draw from Coleman's (2022: 117–121) Critical Process Drama framework, known as the AAAAAH model: *Agency, Aesthetic, Action, Agitation, Ambiguity, and Hope*. Each of these six components is embedded into *Stardust Odyssey* to shape how players navigate power structures, moral dilemmas, and collective decision-making.

Agency plays a central role in transformative education, not just in navigating predefined structures but in challenging them. By fostering hope, critical questioning, and alternative choices, educators create active learning spaces beyond passive engagement. In *Stardust Odyssey*, players are not bound by a predetermined outcome but shape the narrative through their choices.

Dialogues written on the game cards are designed to challenge players to either accept or question prevailing societal conditions. For example, two non-playable character (NPC) cards may reference the same historical event but present contrasting perspectives and choices. One such pair includes the Understar Broadcaster, symbolising media figures in Thailand who work to expose injustice and amplify the voices of marginalised communities, and the Happy Vibes Broadcaster, representing media outlets backed by corporate interests that focus solely on promoting positivity and protecting institutional reputations. By presenting divergent narratives around the same event, these cards reflect the media landscape not only in Thailand but also other societies—where independent journalism and state- or investor-aligned outlets often frame reality in sharply different terms. This mechanic encourages players to

embrace their agency to reflect critically on the role of media in shaping public perception and the importance of whose voices are heard and whose are silenced.

Moreover, facilitators play a crucial role to foster players' agency in the workshops serving as both participants and guides, reinforcing shared responsibility. Players are asked to either accept an unfair system, negotiate power dynamics, or challenge inequalities, collaboratively shaping their society's trajectory.

Aesthetic elements enhance immersion, allowing players to emotionally connect with the fictional world. In *Stardust Odyssey*, the "Memory Notebook", a prologue booklet, introduces characters awakening on an unfamiliar planet amid a dust crisis, read aloud by facilitators, who naturally become storytellers/narrators. Players also read from over thirty non-playable character dialogue cards, transforming them into performers, further embedding them in the game's aesthetic and unfolding events.

Action reinforces the idea that knowledge is experiential and embodied, positioning the body as a site of communication and social critique. The game's role-playing dynamics organically mirror real-world social hierarchies, as players' movements and interactions reflect existing power structures. These dynamics are not dictated by mechanics but emerge through player interaction, making social inequalities tangible rather than theoretical.

Agitation serves as a catalyst for critical discourse, forcing players to confront uncomfortable truths about social injustice. The game unfolds in two phases: Phase 1 – an initial individual decision-making phase (work, walk, play, buy), where players acquire resources, followed by Phase

2, which introduces event and crisis cards that present collective dilemmas and require players to share resources to tackle crises (Figure 1). These moments create tension, requiring players to collaborate or act in self-interest. Some crises demand sacrifices from those with more resources, while others disproportionately impact the disadvantaged, prompting moral dilemmas and negotiations.

Ambiguity resists fixed endings, rigid roles, and linearity, encouraging playfulness, reflection, and imagination while challenging technocratic rationality and neoliberal appraisal systems. Embracing uncertainty, participants engage in context-responsive meaning-making, navigating the boundaries between fiction and reality to make conscious, active choices. The game ensures no single imposed solution—players, whether privileged or marginalised, must interact across class positions and backgrounds. While some pursue individual victories, the game also offers collective success, allowing players to prioritise collective well-being.

Hope sustains agency and optimism, enabling players to envision alternatives to existing power structures (Freire, 1996; Giroux, 2002). *Stardust Odyssey's* ultimate theme incorporates collective victory conditions, encouraging players to explore whether cooperation leads to better long-term outcomes. After gameplay, facilitators lead reflective discussions through *Hope* on the implications of player decisions, emphasising the cost of inaction, systemic change, and real-world applications. Through these conversations, *Stardust Odyssey* reimagines citizenship as an active process, where agency, dialogue, and resistance become central to education and social transformation.

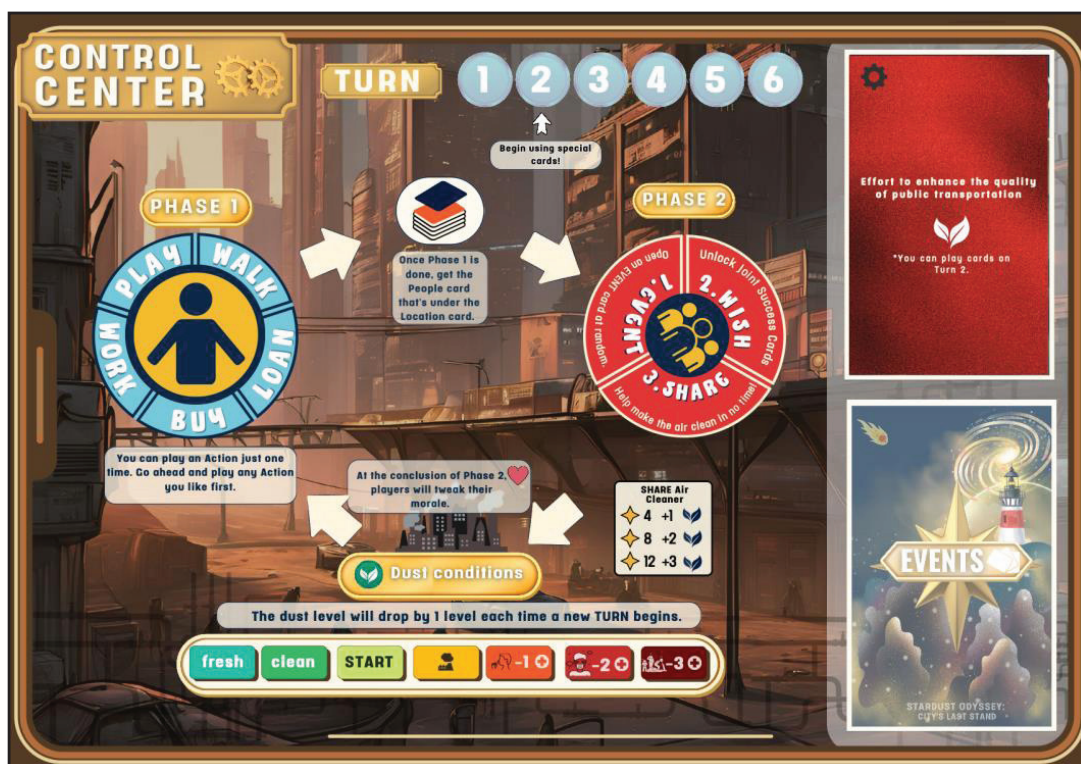


Figure 1 Control Center Board illustrating gameplay mechanics.

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework and DBR Process.

some participants were not originally from Bangkok, their experiences reflect urban middle-class realities, where privileges coexist with vulnerabilities under neoliberal policies. By incorporating diverse roles and lived experiences, this study aims to deepen the understanding of active citizenship as a collective process, while evaluating how *Stardust Odyssey* can engage broader communities in critical dialogue on inequality.

Workshop Structure and Process Drama

Four official workshops were conducted as performative learning environments, where participants navigated in-game socio-economic challenges while critically reflecting on real-world inequalities. Each workshop included 6–12 participants, with four main players and the rest as observers. The workshop followed three phases: Prologue, Gameplay, and Post-Game Reflection.

1) Prologue: Narrative Framing and Immersive Distance

Each workshop began with a storytelling session, where facilitators introduced the game's fictional world and characters in an unknown galaxy. The prologue functioned as a dramatic pretext, immersing participants in the narrative while providing emotional and cognitive distance from their personal lives. By framing the setting as a distant fictional world, the prologue allowed participants to temporarily detach from real-world constraints, creating a protected space to explore complex social issues through play. This technique minimised personal biases or lived struggles from hindering critical engagement, fostering an open, reflective learning environment.

2) Gameplay: Role-Engagement and Facilitator Interventions

Participants played *Stardust Odyssey* for 1.5 to 2.5 hours depending on participants' actions. Facilitators assumed a dual role:

- **Game Narrators** – guiding players through mechanics and objectives while maintaining thematic coherence.
- **Critical Interveners** – ensuring players recognised inequality, privilege, and systemic barriers embedded in the game.

Rather than allowing full immersion, facilitators periodically summarised player decisions and highlighted patterns of resource distribution, decision-making inequalities, and power hierarchies based on players' reactions.

3) Post-Game Discussion: Critical Reflection

A 45-minute to 1-hour structured discussion followed gameplay, allowing participants to connect their in-game experiences to real-world socio-economic structures. Facilitators posed open-ended questions, refined through iteration, such as:

- How did your character's role influence your decision-making and power within the game?
- How did the values of Body, Memory, and Voice shape your character's journey and goals?
- Did you notice parallels between in-game experiences and real-world socio-economic hierarchies?
- How did individual success versus collective responsibility play out in your group's choices?
- For teachers and activists: Which elements of the game could be adapted to your work?

This discussion functioned as a critical meaning-making space, aligning with process drama's emphasis on moving between fiction and reality to encourage social critique.

In addition to the four official workshops, this paper also analyses one independent play session, where university students who had previously observed the game played without facilitators. Voluntary feedback was collected post-game to assess player-driven interpretations.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ITERATIVE REFINEMENT

The DBR process was conducted through four iterative workshops and one independent play session without guidance, where *Stardust Odyssey* was tested, evaluated, and refined based on participant feedback. Data was collected through qualitative methods to assess participant engagement, thematic comprehension, and the game's effectiveness as a learning tool:

- **Participant Observations:** Facilitators documented player interactions, role interpretations, and critical engagement moments.
- **Online Questionnaires:** Participants provided written reflections on their experiences, challenges, and insights.
- **Reflective Writing Exercises:** Short and long responses captured individual interpretations of key learning moments post-game.

Through iterative analysis, refinements were made to game mechanics, character roles, and facilitator interventions to enhance critical discussion.

3.3 RESEARCH ETHICS

This study adhered to ethical principles aligned with participatory and educational research. Participants were informed about the study's nature and purpose, and written consent was obtained prior to their involvement. Anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms, following the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines, and references to collaborating institutions were anonymised for confidentiality. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time, reflecting the principle of voluntary participation (Israel & Hay, 2006). In line

with Freirean pedagogy, the workshops fostered an inclusive environment, empowering participants as co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 1996). Ethical standards of respect, fairness, and the avoidance of harm were upheld, consistent with frameworks for educational and participatory research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

4. WORKSHOP RESULTS

The results, summarised in the table below, are drawn from workshops conducted between April and June 2024

(Table 2). The table includes participant groups, workshop objectives, implemented process drama techniques, key outcomes, challenges, and refinements made to enhance the game's effectiveness.

The results show that process drama techniques effectively immersed participants in their roles while allowing for critical reflection. However, challenges included rule-heavy introductions, the need for stronger collective decision-making mechanics, and ensuring independent play fosters critical engagement.

Refinements based on participant feedback included shortening the introduction, integrating interactive rule

WORKSHOP	PROCESS DRAMA APPLICATION	OUTCOMES	REFINEMENTS
Workshop 1: University Students and Staff Objective: To test <i>Stardust Odyssey</i> as an educational tool, focusing on narrative clarity, engagement, and critical reflection.	- Players embodied characters from different socio-economic classes, making decisions based on limited or abundant resources. - The facilitator spent 20 minutes explaining game rules and features to establish distancing between the characters and the players	Effectiveness - Distanced settings and fictional game elements served as a critical tool, allowing all players to relate them to the ongoing social context in Thailand. - Emotional Immersion in Lower-Status Roles: Players experienced frustration with systemic constraints, which deepened their engagement. - Effective Collective Action: Initially, players did not aim for a collective victory card, but facilitator guidance led them to help a struggling player, revealing collective consequences in the next turn. This experience increased their motivation to pursue more collective victories. Challenges - Overlong Introduction: Many found the introduction too lengthy, making it hard to absorb the rules and stay engaged. - Ineffective People Cards: Players saw the non-playable-background cards as non-functional and unappealing. - Poor Time Management: Limited time for post-game discussion reduced opportunities for meaningful reflection.	- Reduced the facilitator's instructive section to under 10 minutes, focusing on introducing character conflicts rather than extensively explaining the rules. - Redesigned People Cards to be more immersive by adding dialogues that make characters speak directly to the players, enhancing engagement. - Added game mechanics that allow People Cards to be used for negotiation, ensuring their functional relevance within the gameplay. - Encouraged facilitators to have players read aloud character dialogues as a short performance, allowing all players to engage with the city's story collectively. - Limited gameplay duration to ensure sufficient time for post-game discussions, enabling critical reflection and commentary, a core aspect of process drama.
Workshop 2: School Teachers and Welfare Activists Objective: Evaluate the game's effectiveness as a co-learning and advocacy tool, allowing participants to integrate it into their work and facilitate community engagement through perspective exchange.	- Participants stepped into roles reflecting real socio-economic hierarchies, engaging in structured negotiation and decision-making. - Teachers and welfare activists were encouraged to engage in role-specific improvisation, making spontaneous choices rather than defaulting to their activist perspectives, to enhance role-playing immersion.	Effectiveness - Empathy & Perspective-Taking: Teachers who are social activists gained insight into the limited perspectives of the privileged by role-playing as Stars Collector. The People Cards were well-received by all players for their refined narratives and functionality. - Effectiveness in Communicating Inequality: A welfare activist highlighted the game's ability to convey inequality through immersive storytelling and embodied experiences that often ignored in quantitative research and data. - Impact of Post-Game Discussion: Reflection was most effective when ample time was given for debriefing. Challenges - Learning Curve for New Players: A teacher unfamiliar with tabletop games initially felt overwhelmed by game's introduction, although later grasped the mechanics through observation and experience. - Focus on Individual Success: Many prioritised personal victories, overlooking the game's theme of collective action.	- Facilitators should be encouraged to prompt players to explore strategic collaboration when opportunities for collective action arise. - Reflective prompts were added to guide post-game discussions, ensuring deeper critical reflection on socio-economic inequality. - The game introduction was further shortened, limiting pre-play instructions to the prologue only, allowing players to immerse themselves naturally and learn through experience.

WORKSHOP	PROCESS DRAMA APPLICATION	OUTCOMES	REFINEMENTS
Workshop 3: Drama Teachers and Salaried Workers Objective: Evaluate the game's facilitation by teachers who previously played as participants, ensuring it functions independently of the creator. Assess how the game performs with a broader group of players.	- Facilitation by Former Players: Teachers from previous workshops guided gameplay using structured improvisation and reflective questioning to navigate role-based dilemmas. - Active Participation: Facilitators encouraged players to read aloud People Card dialogues, emphasising that, like real-life social connections, engagement requires active involvement.	Effectiveness - Effectiveness of Process Drama Techniques: A drama teacher's expressive reading on the People Cards enhanced both immersion and critical distance, reinforcing the safety of roleplay even in difficult roles. - Rich Discussions on Power & Inequality: The game fostered deep post-game discussions, showing that process drama can function without direct creator involvement. Challenges - Facilitation Challenges: A facilitator struggled to balance guidance and autonomy, while experienced players unintentionally revealed strategies, limiting discovery for newcomers. - Mechanics Over Narrative: One participant focused purely on game mechanics, disengaging from the emotional and narrative aspects during the gameplay.	- The facilitator's role was revised to give players more control over their decisions, allowing them to actively resist systemic constraints. - People Card dialogues were shortened to help players focused on mechanics engage more easily with the storytelling.
Workshop 4: Welfare Activists, Freelancers, and Salaried Workers Objective: Evaluate how the game provokes critical reflection in a diverse participant group, with one pre-assigned player role to observe its impact on game dynamics.	Facilitator Replay Experiment: A teacher who had previously played and facilitated the game was assigned to replay the most privileged role (Stars Collector) with a sole focus on achieving an individual goal.	Effectiveness - Entertaining yet Critical: The pre-assigned role was further improvised, creating strong tension during negotiations, leading to both shouting and laughter. A player who achieved individual victory felt uneasy about their character's dialogue, recognising that their success came at the expense of others, highlighting critical awareness of inequality despite mastering the mechanics. - Recognition of Ethical Dilemmas: Players identified and discussed complex moral issues embedded in the game mechanics. - Balanced Facilitator Role: The facilitator effectively balanced narration and guidance, ensuring the mechanics supported critical engagement. Challenges - Frustration with Role Constraints: Players in lower-status roles felt powerless, reflecting real-world inequalities. While an activist saw this as insightful, it risked disengagement for those unfamiliar with social justice, who felt unable to influence the game.	Adjusted game mechanics to increase character agency, ensuring players had more flexibility in resisting systemic oppression. For example, the Dust Cleaner character can use the Dust Bag card, which causes negative health effects for all players, enabling collective bargaining among them.
Workshop 5: Independent Play – University Students Objective: To test whether the game fosters critical reflection without a creator and facilitator.	- Players made independent decisions, relying on the game's mechanics as a facilitator. - Reflection was voluntary, with written notes and verbal feedback collected after the session.	Effectiveness - Engagement with Inequality Theme: Students engaged deeply by unlocking multiple collective victory cards. Some initially believed they had lost but later realised they were the first group to achieve the most collective victories. Challenges - Risk of Misinterpreting Meritocracy: Some players have potentials to see the game as reinforcing rather than critiquing meritocracy, highlighting the need for stronger built-in reflection mechanisms when the game is played without a facilitator.	- Enhancing Independent Play: Reflective prompts were embedded into the game mechanics, encouraging critical engagement without facilitation. People Card dialogues were redesigned as open-ended questions, while the introduction card now includes guiding questions and an explicit mention of the game's theme. - A "Memory Notebook" allows players to record reflections, fostering internal dialogue. - Six blank People Cards enable players to create characters, encouraging improvisation. A conceptual video link was added to reinforce critical reflection.

Table 2 Workshops Results (April–June 2024).

explanations, enhancing performative elements like reading People Cards aloud, and strengthening reflective prompts for both facilitated and independent play. Experimenting with a facilitator playing a pre-scripted role further enriched gameplay. Adjustments to game mechanics also increased player agency, deepening engagement with inequality and systemic structures.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 PROCESS DRAMA AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Balancing Emotion and Critical Distancing

Workshop results highlight the importance of balancing emotional engagement with critical analysis in process drama gameplay. Post-game discussions revealed that achieving this balance is challenging and requires careful attention to both narrative design and facilitation.

The alien setting, though fictional, incorporated relatable elements that effectively employed Brechtian distancing to promote critical reflection. For instance, the game's unequal resource distribution—where some roles begin with significant advantages while others face immediate scarcity—mirrors Thailand's class divisions and structural inequalities. Crisis event cards such as “City Lockdown” and “Market Shutdown” were directly inspired by real challenges faced by marginalised communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly daily wage workers who struggled to maintain their livelihoods under extended lockdowns (Ippoodom, 2020). As one participant from Workshop 1 noted, “*The game sets up the situation more clearly. When there's a character that's not you, it helps you see the story and attitude more clearly.*” This use of distancing enabled players to critically reflect on the roles they inhabited in the game without conflating them with their personal identities.

However, some participants—particularly in Workshop 3—became overly distanced, prioritising gameplay success over engaging with the game's underlying systemic critique. To address this, elements such as People Cards, in-game dialogues, and performative reading tasks were refined to be more concise yet emotionally resonant. These changes were designed to balance Brechtian distancing (through multi-role play) with immersion (through first-person narrative reading). By Workshop 4, these refinements showed a clear impact. One player, after earning a “Rising-Stars Influencer Award” Victory Card—symbolising Thailand's social media trend of toxic positivity, which promotes personal optimism while ignoring structural issues (Thammaboosadee, 2019; Saejia, 2020)—realised through the card's dialogue that their victory was achieved by deceiving the city into believing the ongoing dust crisis was not real. The player reacted, “What?! This character is actually a bad guy.” Despite winning the game, this moment illustrates

how the use of Brechtian distancing—by deliberately juxtaposing immersion and detachment—can foster critical self-awareness and deepen ethical reflection.

Regarding facilitation, balancing emotional engagement and analytical reasoning was another challenge. In Workshops 1 and 2, facilitators focused on describing gameplay mechanics to maintain distanced engagement, but this limited emotional connection at the start. In Workshop 3, facilitators engaged too deeply, unintentionally restricting player agency. Although *Stardust Odyssey* can be played without facilitators, its core message—confronting socio-economic inequality—benefits from well-designed facilitation. Facilitators should act as both narrators, providing emotional and informative context, and critical interveners, guiding players to engage with the theme.

For instance, during Workshop 4, a facilitator explained why a character could earn more money, noting that higher initial values in Voice, Body, and Memory offered greater opportunities, despite all players starting with the same resources. This intervention helped players see how in-game actions mirror real-world socio-economic dynamics, reinforcing process drama's educational objectives. While players made autonomous choices, facilitators subtly guided reflections, prompting comparisons of characters' struggles and advantages.

To support independent play, the latest refinement includes guidance text to encourage critical thinking without facilitators. The game's introduction now provides a structured guideline to ensure key themes remain central to the experience.

Critical Process Drama (AAAAAH) and The Inequality Theme

Designed to reveal everyday inequality and offer alternative paths to collective victory, *Stardust Odyssey* successfully applies critical process drama (AAAAAH). By stepping into characters facing systemic challenges, players not only experience the emotions of inequality firsthand but also reflect on how privilege and power operate in both the game world and reality.

A Workshop 2 social-activism participant who played Stars Collector, the most privileged character, observed:

Holding enough resources to influence the direction and fate of society at will allowed me to exercise power over other participants... Empathy faded astonishingly when power was in my hands.

This reflects the Agency principle of the AAAAHH framework, demonstrating how embodied experiences reveal power dynamics. While the player felt the power, they were able to step out of the role during the discussion phase and critically analyse their experience.

In contrast, players in lower-status roles, such as Dust Cleaner, often expressed frustration and helplessness, mirroring real-world struggles shown in Workshop 4.

While this created a powerful learning moment, it also raised concerns about whether the game disempowered players unfamiliar with social justice discourse. However, this discomfort aligns with the *Agitation* principle in process drama, where tension fuels deeper engagement with systemic injustice.

The game's *Aesthetic* aspects also played a key role, as its artistic design and immersive storytelling heightened emotional and intellectual engagement. As a Workshop 2 participant noted:

I love the story, the characters, and the overall cuteness—everything is just so adorable! At first, I was focused on my own mission, but as the game progressed, different story elements unfolded. It felt like I gradually gained a deeper understanding of social issues.

Ambiguity was another central feature, as outcomes and endings varied across sessions. One Workshop 3 participant, despite having the opportunity to unlock a personal victory card, chose instead to explore alternative possibilities, demonstrating how the game fosters open-ended critical inquiry rather than rigid goal-oriented play. Similarly, when a teacher transitioned from player to facilitator and later returned as a pre-assigned role player, it reinforced the fluidity of hierarchies, highlighting how facilitators can shift between guiding and participating to stress the game's themes.

Across workshops, players with greater resources often dominated discussions and negotiations with louder voices, some even standing while negotiating. In contrast, players in lower-status roles repeatedly justified their needs, some pleading, while others acted out in protest, mirroring real-world power imbalances. This illustrates the *Action* principle of critical process drama, reinforcing how embodied experiences foster critical awareness.

For *Hope*, the tension between individual success and collective action underscored the conflict between neoliberal individualism and social responsibility. A Workshop 4 participant reflected:

The collaborative parts of the game really show how important it is to work together. You can't just think about yourself; you have to think about everyone else, too.

However, some players prioritised personal victories over systemic critique, highlighting the need for game instructions that explicitly reinforce collective decision-making, rather than assuming players will naturally engage with it.

While facilitated workshops and post-game discussions effectively helped players recognise inequality and collective possibilities, this message was less predictable in independent play. To address this, storytelling elements

must serve as built-in facilitators as much as possible, explicitly reinforcing the game's themes and objectives to ensure players fully grasp its intended message. For instance, People Card dialogues were restructured into open-ended prompts, while the introduction card now features guiding questions and a clear statement of the game's core theme.

5.2 DBR's ITERATIVE DESIGN AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The iterative design process, guided by Design-Based Research (DBR), ensured that *Stardust Odyssey* continuously evolved to enhance both emotional engagement and critical analysis. Each workshop contributed to refining game mechanics to better promote active citizenship and critical thinking about socio-economic structures.

Rather than framing active citizenship as a passive civic duty, the DBR process positions it as an ongoing practice—a rehearsal of thought, questioning, and challenging power structures. Workshop results show that DBR integrates real-life experimentation into research design, ensuring the game's message remains effective and thematically balanced. While participant reactions naturally vary based on their characters, DBR minimises unintended design flaws that could disrupt the process.

For instance, in Workshop 1, players discovered the opportunity for collective victory early in the game. However, in Workshop 2, this mechanic was easily overlooked without explicit reinforcement through game mechanics and facilitation. To address this, refinements were made to facilitator prompts, ensuring this aspect was clearly highlighted.

By Workshop 3, after multiple refinements, the game demonstrated a strong balance between mechanics and thematic engagement. However, some players focusing solely on game mechanics still overlooked critical themes. To counter this, additional design elements were introduced, including a detailed introduction book and a memory notebook embedding the city's crisis of inequality into gameplay. These additions reinforced key themes, especially for independent play without facilitators.

Beyond the four officially documented workshops, the game has been casually played by over ten different groups. Every session under my observation produced unique narratives, endings, and atmospheres, while consistently exploring inequality. This variation highlights how interactive learning environments push participants beyond theoretical discussions, immersing them in experiential social critique. The game's structure—where personal and collective struggles intertwine—exposes the friction between neoliberal ideology and communal responsibility.

Recent refinements, including expanding player agency through dynamic role shifts and introducing special items for collective bargaining, further address the challenge of balancing systemic constraints and

opportunities for resistance. These changes ensure that players experience both the limitations of existing structures and the potential to challenge them. Feedback from the independent play session (Workshop 5) strongly demonstrates that the game's themes remain deeply embodied, even in the absence of a facilitator. As one player noted in a voluntary written reflection:

We unlocked nearly all the collective victory cards, but does that make society fair? In our victory, the wealthiest player had a monument in their honour and helped the most—because they had the most money. Is this truly equality? It made me think: In history, we glorify powerful figures, but what about the Dust Cleaner or the Backpacker who struggled to survive? Have they never been important? Have they not shaped history? Why are their names missing from the books? Why do they have no monuments?

The same participant expanded on this in their written response, reflecting on how certain celebrated public political figures in Thai society are praised for “speaking for the people,” yet questioning whether these voices genuinely reflect the struggles of marginalised communities—such as the group of fishermen protesting against a development project that threatens to dismantle their local fishing community. These fishermen mobilised from southern Thailand to the capital, only to be largely ignored (Verasopon, 2023). This moment illustrates how process drama enables players to bring the fictional narrative into direct conversation with the Thai society they inhabit, fostering deeper ethical and political awareness that transcends the game environment. Ultimately, it underscores the game's goal of redefining active citizenship by challenging dominant socio-economic hierarchies through participatory, reflective play.

5.3 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study opens up several avenues for further research on the use of tabletop games and process drama in educational contexts. One direction is the development of a comprehensive teaching kit version of *Stardust Odyssey*, designed to support instruction on inequality across different socio-cultural settings. This would involve adapting narrative elements and gameplay mechanics to reflect local realities while preserving the game's core emphasis on critical reflection and collective action.

Future studies could also investigate whether the game's strategic use of fictional distance—setting the narrative in a galaxy far from Thailand while embedding familiar socio-economic dynamics—remains effective in promoting critical engagement in other cultural contexts. Additionally, researchers may explore whether the game's individual components (e.g., character cards, work cards, victories cards, or crisis scenarios) can be modularised for use in time-constrained classrooms with large student groups, potentially addressing a broader range of social issues.

Another valuable direction would involve comparing how players from different national or cultural backgrounds respond to the shared emotional and structural burdens of neoliberal systems. Such comparative studies could analyse differences in tone, memory, and dialogue, highlighting how participants interpret and articulate systemic inequality from their own societal and cultural experiences.

Finally, future research could involve underprivileged groups to gain deeper insights into how different players experience power and agency within the game. Exploring whether repeated play fosters sustained critical consciousness could also be valuable.

6. CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Stardust Odyssey: City's Last Stand* offers insights into creating engaging learning experiences within Thailand's neoliberal education context. This study advocates redefining active citizenship in Thai education, shifting from individual achievement to collective action. By integrating creative practices, educators can foster dialogic environments that challenge inequality and injustice. The game uses process drama to encourage critical engagement, while the Design-Based Research (DBR) approach enabled iterative refinements to balance immersion, agency, and systemic critique.

Findings show that Brechtian distancing helps participants examine power structures, and facilitated discussions enhance engagement. However, independent play sometimes led to meritocratic interpretations, highlighting the need for structured reflection mechanisms in educational games.

This study demonstrates the potential of integrating process drama and game-based learning to foster critical engagement with socio-economic inequality. Looking ahead, future research can build on this foundation by exploring the game's adaptability across contexts, its impact on diverse player groups, and its capacity to foster sustained critical consciousness through repeated play.

Beyond research, *Stardust Odyssey* has strong educational and advocacy applications. In classrooms, it serves as an experiential learning tool, though scalability is a challenge. Larger classrooms may need modified structures or breakout discussions. For activists, the game's immersive narratives make complex social issues more accessible and complement public campaigns. It also acts as a critical rehearsal space to challenge inequality.

Despite multiple design and testing cycles, the game continues to evolve, shaped by participant feedback and theoretical reflection. A public space on the game's website will enable users to share implementation strategies, fostering ongoing dialogue among educators and practitioners, expanding the game's impact, and encouraging collective engagement.

As education increasingly reflects neoliberal values, alternative pedagogical tools are essential for fostering critical thinking and collective action. *Stardust Odyssey* bridges the gap between knowledge and action, encouraging players to critically engage with and challenge inequality. By refining and expanding educational games, scholars, educators, and activists can create transformative learning environments that empower individuals to become agents of change. Education should not just reflect the world—it should help reimagine and transform it.

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