



The Paradox of Play

Description

Play from the Start

When we are born, we don't have a set of predefined rules imprinted on us about what we should and shouldn't do or how we should and shouldn't do it! Babies have a totally open and clear mind.

They spend their time learning everything they can, using all their senses. They learn the sound of their mother's voice, the feel of her touch, the scent of her hair, all before they even open their eyes to learn what she looks like.

From that moment on, they are exploring their environment and learning. Everything is new to them, it's exciting and probably terrifying in equal measure. Strange faces, strange smells, and tastes. People playing peekaboo, talking in strange voices and making odd sounds that should probably mean something, but don't. They get bounced on knees, thrown in the air, passed around and cuddled like a toy. The experience new things called emotions; love, fear, joy, sadness and more.

As soon as they can, they start to interact with their environment, turning from a passive to an active learner. Picking up new things, learning what they feel like, what they taste like and what they do when you throw them at Dad. They start to play. I refer to this form of learning without deliberately setting out to learn in a structured way as **ambient learning**.

Defining Play

Play is an odd word in the English language that has several meanings. If you look for a definition in the dictionary you may be surprised at how many ways we use the word. Consider the following sentences.

- We are going to play a game of rugby
- We are going out to play
- There is a little bit of play in the winding mechanism of this watch

- It was just a play on words
- There were greater forces at play than they were aware of
- You can't just play at being a politician
- I love to play the guitar
- You shouldn't play with people's emotions
- He was back in play

Each instance of the word *play* has a slightly different meaning and intention – I have not even included one that represents a show put on by actors!

However, for me, there are some common threads. Each use of the word play feels slightly abstract as if it does not totally define a fixed point in time and space. Also, they are often associated with something either trivial (by grown up adult standards) and/or creative.

- **We are going to play a game of rugby**
 - We are involved in an activity called rugby, and whilst we are all working towards the same goal, our personal motives and activities at any time may well be different from each other's.
- **We are going out to play**
 - We are going out to be involved in various activities that may or may not have defined rules and objectives, but that we will all hopefully enjoy and get something from.
- **There is a little bit of play in the winding mechanism of this watch**
 - The winding mechanism sits in a space within which it can move without affecting the watch.
- **It was just a play on words**
 - The phrase was an amusing use of a word or words that could have another meaning.
- **There were greater forces at play than they were aware of**
 - There were greater forces in somewhat active that they were not aware of.
- **You can't just play at being a politician**
 - You can't be silly and non-committed about being a politician
- **I love to play the guitar**
 - I love to create music with my guitar
- **You shouldn't play with people's emotions**
 - You should not trivialise people's emotions for your own amusement or benefits.
- **She was back in play**
 - She was brought back into the activity which she had previously been excluded from for some reason.



What I take from that is that play is as much a feeling or even an emotion as it is a finite

activity. I have said in the past that play, for me, sits in a space between [chaos on control!](#) ¹

For our purposes here, I want to focus on pure play as it can be associated with ambient learning and games. If we were to derive a definition of pure play in that context, I would go for;

“Activities participated in voluntary for pleasure, with no purposefully designed

system rules or objectives”

As a lovely aside, according to the Oxford Dictionary, play is derived in the following way;

Old English pleg(i)an ‘to exercise’, plega ‘brisk movement’, related to Middle Dutch pleien ‘leap for joy, dance’.

The Affordances of Play



When we engage in play or when we play a game we must accept certain ideas, affordances.

- We accept the rules, be they implicit rules and [meta-rules](#)² in the case of pure play or the system rules in games. We approach the activity with a playful or *lusory* attitude³ (derived from the Latin word for play – *Ludos*). These rules can cover a broad range, from social norms to personal ideals.
- We accept that play and the space within in which play takes place, be it physical or fantasy, is “safe”. By safe, I mean that the fantasy world in which play exists is perceived as safe from controllable real world consequences. This is referred to as the *Magic Circle*⁴, which can be thought of as a kind of shield from reality. For example, if you are playing a game of ‘cops and robbers’, shooting the robber is not going to get you sent to jail! This is a fairly black and white description, it is in fact much more permeable than a shield, the real world and the fantasy world can affect each other greatly during play. Also, this doesn’t mean that the players are actually protected from the real world, but to maintain the fantasy they have to *feel* that they are. Falling out of a tree can still result in a broken arm!

Without these affordances and mindset, play can’t take place.

Learning to be less playful

The open, playful, lusory attitude that is required to fully engage in play is something that is battered out of us as trivial and unimportant as we get older. “Games are for kids.” “We are too busy to play.” “What is play anyway except for a childish waste of valuable time?”

Until we hit formalised education, everything important that we need to know, we learn through varying degrees of play and experimentation.

Once we are a certain age, this all changes. Learning is much more structured, in many ways becoming more game-like than play-like. This in itself is not an issue, the issue is how the “game” is designed. The Magic Circle is often broken, with people not feeling that they are safe from consequences. The lusory attitude is missing and also the affordances of play are ignored. The whole

affair becomes less voluntary and more stressful for the child. You can't measure play very easily, but you can measure test results and other check box related methods of assessment. There is no room for the flexibility to teach students based solely on their abilities and needs rather than their age. Memory and presenteeism are often seen as more important than talent.

It is easy to assert that the most complex things we learn in life happen in a playful way and how important play is to childhood and adult development ⁵⁻⁹. "But wait you crazy man, there was not much play in my Astrophysics PhD and that was bloody complex!!" True, but there are two things to consider there;

1. Is that because the PhD was badly designed?
2. Was it as complex as learning motor skills, language skills, cognitive skills or social skills as a developing child?

Astrophysics is indeed very complex, but it still relies on skills and processes that you had to learn for yourself through play as a child with no concept of what anything was.

However, even though we know this or at least accept that play can be important to development and learning, we still don't want to let it cross over into our perceived serious world. We want to do everything the hard and un-fun way. Read the book, do the test, read the book, do the test, do the bigger test, read another book...

This only gets worse as they enter higher education and then work, be it workplace based training or actual day to day business. All thoughts of play within the context of "real and important" life are put to one side, reserved only for moments of relaxation or entertainment or the golf course. Play is a dirty word, one that does not directly translate into profit.

The Paradox!



This finally brings us to the Paradox of Play.

Life becomes much less playful as we become adults because we are seemingly unable to hold the concept of seriousness and playfulness in our minds at the same time. Our core, primal being is aware of how important play is, but society has made us believe that play is trivial and wasteful. This cognitive dissonance is eased by us creating justifications around how seriousness is what earns us the money, being serious pays the bills and gets us better jobs so is more important than play.

However, it is my belief that we all still have that inner child that loves to play, we just need to feel safe letting it out!

In fact, you can see this inner child being released when play is introduced into workshops that participants feel are designed to achieve important goals. These important and busy types become children, often to the point of being disruptive due to all the desires to have fun being so repressed and

suddenly having a release! It's like watching a room full of people who have needed a fart for 20 years finally letting go! But as soon as they go back to the office, 99% will go back to their usual ways.

The Solution?

My question is, can we undo this? Is there a way to change the way we look at play. We almost need a great PR company to start making it look cool again!

This is starting to happen. There are teachers out there who know how important play is and they are doing amazing things, integrating play and games into education. Games based learning is trending all over the world now, which is fantastic.

As with all things, this is slower in the world of business. The popularity of gamification has helped a little as people are seeing some results, but it is showing the huge and unrealistic increases the hype had promised 5 years ago. The new generations of employees coming up the ranks are also helping, but there is still a while before they hit the lofty heights of directors in the older – larger companies.

However, we can all try to make play more accessible and seem less childish by changing some of the ways we speak about play-like activities. We can talk about it is a way that helps the less interested understand. Rather than talking about playfulness, speak of open-mindedness. Freedom to experiment becomes autonomy, less system defined rules becomes trust. Speak of innovation and prototyping, and 80/20 rules on development work (20% of your time in a month can be on projects if you're choosing as long as they are of benefit to the company). Games based training becomes scenario based training. All these things have an element of play about them and don't seem to be all that frivolous.

Anyone can see play anywhere if they are willing to look hard enough, open their minds and free their inner child from time to time!

Citations

1. Marczewski, A. Play in Context. (2016). at <<https://www.gamified.uk/2016/09/26/play-in-context/>>
2. Marczewski, A. Exploring the Meta-Rules of Play. (2016). at <<https://www.gamified.uk/2016/12/09/exploring-meta-rules-play/>>
3. Suits, B. What Is a Game? *Philosophy of Science* **34**, 148 (1967).
4. Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens: A study of the play - element in culture. a study of the element of play in culture* (1950). doi:10.1177/0907568202009004005
5. Ginsburg, K. R. The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics* **119**, 182–191 (2007).
6. Whitebread, D. D. The Importance of Play. *Univ. Cambridge* 1–55 (2012). doi:10.5455/msm.2015.27.438-441
7. Bjorklund, D. F. & Pellegrini, A. D. in *The origins of human nature: Evolutionary developmental psychology* 297–331 (2001).
8. Campbell, G. Why play is essential to brain health with Dr. Stuart Brown (BSP 60). *Brain Science Podcast* (2009). at <<http://www.brainsciencepodcast.com/bsp/why-play-is-essential-to-brain-health-with-dr-stuart-brown-b.html>>

9. Sutton-Smith, B. The opposite of play is not work — it is depression. *Stanford Neurosciences Institute* (2015). at <<https://neuroscience.stanford.edu/news/opposite-play-not-work---it-depression>>

Category

1. Gamification
2. Education

Tags

1. games
2. home ludens
3. magic circle
4. meta rules of play
5. meta-rules
6. paradox
7. play
8. research
9. rules

Date Created

10/05/2017

Author

andrzej-marczewski

default watermark