

In the last part of my [introduction to gamification](#), I explained a little about my thoughts on Games Based Solutions, but I didn't really explain what a game actually is. The reason for that is, it is a little complicated from an academic perspective. Now, that doesn't really affect you in a business setting or as you undertake your job as a gamification designer, but it is always useful to have a deeper understanding of things you are speaking about.

Play

Let's start with play as this is the foundation of games. There are many thoughts on play, I have a whole ebook and sections of [Even Ninja Monkeys Like to Play](#) dedicated to it. However, in this introduction series, I want to try and keep things simple!

I define play in the following way;

Play is a free-form activity that is undertaken because it brings fun or joy.

When I go deeper into the subject, I start to speak about things like system rules, [meta-rules](#) and all sorts. For our purposes now all you need to understand are two key points.

1. Play has to have a perceived safe space to occur. This space is called the Magic Circle^{1,2} and is an imaginary barrier between the real world and all its consequences and the play world.
2. There are no system imposed rules. That is there are no set goals, defined obstacles etc.

This is not to say that play has no rules, but they are referred to as implicit rather than explicit rules - ie they are not defined by some external designer.

Let me give a simple example, which will lead us neatly into how games can be defined. Two children are playing with dolls. They create an elaborate imaginary world where Mrs Jenkins is having a tea party. They role play with the dolls and create imaginary scenarios. There are no goals, or rules, just imagination and fun.

The same two children are now outside and are just kicking a ball around. This is still play as there is no reason to kick the ball other than because they are enjoying it. Whilst there are no system defined or imposed explicit rules, there are implicit rules associated with the ball. Gravity, friction, momentum etc. There are also meta-rules, unwritten and constantly fluid rules that the children communicate through body language, mood, quick comments and the like.

Then one child says to the other, “Let’s make a goal and see who can score the most goals against the other”. Suddenly there is a system rule, a rule explicitly created and imposed on the play. It is no longer free form and lawless, there is a rule and we now have a game!

Games

This leads us neatly into games. There are many, many definitions of games. Some talk about the nature of games themselves at a philosophical level “[...] a word like “game” points to a somewhat diffuse “system” of prototype frames, among which some frame-shifts are easy, but others involve more strain”³ from Marvin Minsky, others are a bit more practical, such as Sid Meier’s “A series of meaningful choices”⁴

For us, we can say that a game is *an activity with set goals, challenges and rules defined about how goals are achieved, and challenges are completed*. Now, this may seem like a definition of work! One of the things that set games apart from work is how you approach them. Games are approached with something called a “*Lusory Attitude*”. We enter a game with the mindset of “This is a game, I am going to play it and in some way enjoy my time”.

To go slightly deeper, we can look at a definition that Bernard Suits offers⁵;

“To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].”

Take a game of golf. The aim of golf is to get a little ball in a hole. This is the *Prelusory Goal*. The most efficient way to do this would be to just carry the ball to the hole and drop it in. However, there are rules that prevent this method, *Constitutive Rules*. You must use a club and start a set distance, the *Lusory Means*. You accept these rules because that is what makes the game of golf fun for you, you step on the golf course with a *Lusory Attitude*.

Again, there needs to also be a safe place for the player, one that is set apart from the real world - the magic circle.

In games, these system-imposed rules are usually created by the game designer. However, they can also be created by the player as they start to experiment with the game. This is called *emergent gameplay*, where the player begins to create new ways of playing that the designer had not considered or explicitly built. For instance, speed runs in games such as Super Mario. The original designer had not explicitly stated that there should be a version of gameplay where you had to get from the start to the finish of each level in the fastest

possible time, players decided to do that themselves and set specific rules about how this could be done, the hardware used, the methods for recording the attempts etc.

I will explore emergent gameplay when I delve deeper into how to make use of play in the next blog.

Toys

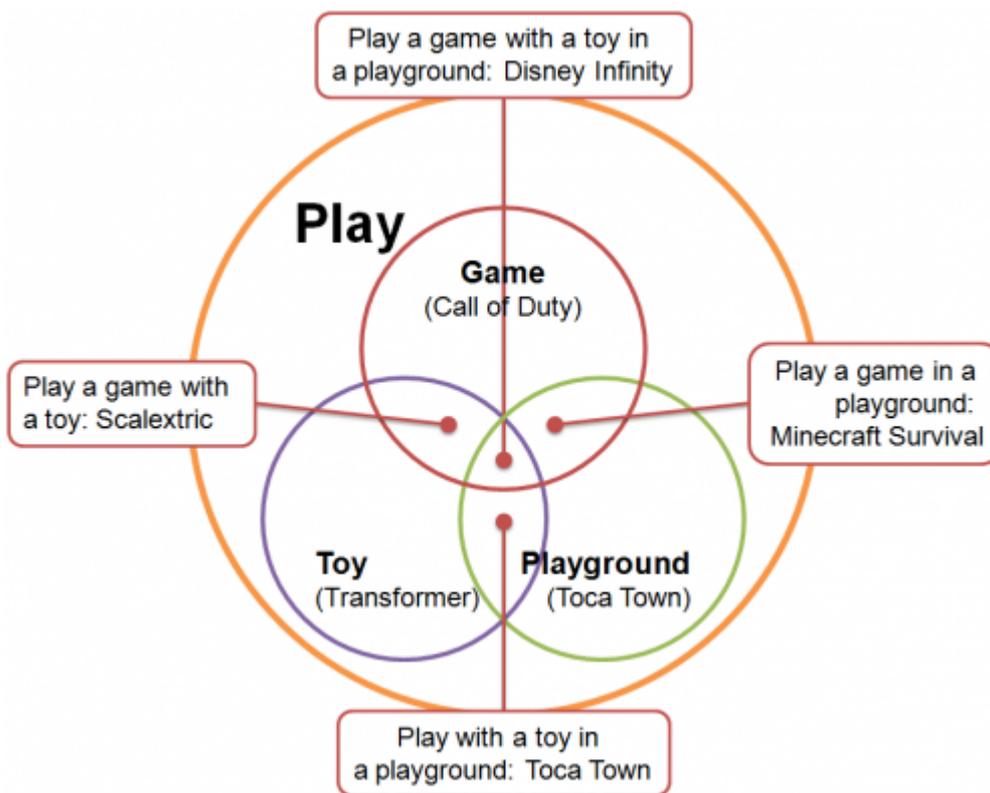
I include toys just for the sake of completeness. A toy is an object that is used in play or games that has no explicit rules of its own.

If we go back to our children playing with a ball. The ball has no explicit or system-imposed rules attached to it. It does not tell you that you must kick it at a goal. All the ball is interested in are its implicit rules, such as how gravity may affect it when it is kicked in the air!

Any object used in play and games can be considered a toy, from a stick to an action figure. But toys can also be far more complex. When you consider a video game like Minecraft, you could say that the environment is a toy! There are no system rules stating how you play with the environment. There are implicit rules such as how high you can stack blocks or how blocks might react to each other when combined, but there is no one telling you how to use them. When an entire environment is a toy, it is often referred to as a *playground* or a *sandbox*.

The Big Picture

By way of a summary, I will leave you with this image that starts to bring all of these concepts together with a little.



Play, Games, Toys and Playgrounds

- You play.
- You play a game.
- You play with a toy.
- You play a game with a toy.

In the next blog, I will talk about how we can start to make use of play in the real working world until then, look around you with a lusory attitude and see what you could make more play or game like!

Key Learning Points

- Play is freeform and has no system-imposed rules
- Games have system-imposed rules, like those created by a game designer in a video game
- For games or play to happen they must be approached with a *lusory attitude* and occur in a perceived safe environment, or *magic circle*.

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