

Games and Play



As the title suggests, I love to play. Sadly, my Master is not as fun as he makes out. It has been so long since I last played, I have almost forgotten how. This chapter is my favourite as it reminds me of what play is all about.

This is an extract from [Even Ninja Monkeys Like to Play: Unicorn Edition](#), available from Amazon!



Defining Play

There are many definitions of play that people with an interest probably argue over! The most well know is that of Johan Huizinga from his book *Homo Ludens*. He describes play in the following way.

"Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means. [1]"

Mine is a little less complex and fits with my personal philosophies on play.

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

The nature of play helps us to understand the building blocks of games.

The rest of this chapter will go into this in much more detail, suffice to say – it really is not as simple as it seems, but it is fascinating!

Lusory Attitude

Play has been an area of academic study since the times of Plato! Whilst I researched play, one word became hard to ignore - ludic.

It comes up often in papers and articles about play. Ludic is derived from the Latin for play, *ludus*, and is defined as “*Showing spontaneous and undirected playfulness*” [2].

Ludic turns up in various forms when academics speak about play. Here are a few examples.

- **Ludus:** the original Latin for play
- **Ludeme:** an element or unit of play [3]
- **Prelusory goals:** goals set by the game
- **Lusory means:** rules set by the game
- **Lusory attitude:** a playful mindset, an understanding that you are entering play

The last three are from Bernard Suit’s definition of a game described in his seminal book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* ¹⁰.

“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].”

This “lusory” attitude is the key that separates play from any other activity. As an example, read this passage as if it related to a job or academic studies.

- You start with a tutorial. It sets the context for what you are doing as well as giving you the basic skills to start.
- You are then given a set of tasks to complete and goals.
- Next, you start performing simple tasks repeatedly to improve your knowledge and skills.
- As your level of skill increases, new challenges become available and new goals are set. These require you to learn new skills and increase your abilities.
- Along the way, there are surprises and unexpected events. You will meet new people; some will be friends who you will work with, some will not.
- All the while, you will be collecting experience and currency as you complete progress.

Now, read it with a lusory or playful attitude. Approach it as if you were reading about a new game.

Play, Toys and Games

All of this raises the question of what play is and how it is different from games.

Play

There are many views of play out there. My view is that play is a free-form activity that is undertaken because it brings fun and joy. In this sort of description, play is an activity – it follows a similar line of thought to that proposed by historian, Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* [1].

Huizinga also gave us another important concept. When considering games and play, the *Magic Circle*. The Magic Circle can be visualised as a boundary between reality and play, with you sat at the centre of it as you play.

There are many variations on this idea, most famously Frames from Gregory Bateson [4] and its expansion by Erving Goffman. [5] This expansion described a frame as a set of unspoken, implicit rules that surround the fantasy world, created through play, referred to as meta-communication.

Play does not need to have a point or a defined goal to it. It exists within a set of rules created by the person or people playing and is born in the imagination. Often it is a way of exploring the boundaries and extremes of something.

Play is essential for children as it teaches them about their environment and themselves [6]. It is also important to consider that children play just because they can, and it entertains them! Like adults, they are seeking novel experiences.

When my daughters were very young, they used to engage in pure play. They did things because they were new and judging by their smiles and their laughter – they enjoyed it. I would go so far as to say they found it fun. Play did not need external objects at first; they could just move their foot and find that hilarious. As they developed, their own movements became less interesting, probably because they had discovered the boundaries of what could be done, so players needed to have some help. They would pick up props and use them in ways they found entertaining. These props became toys.

Toys

Toys are an interesting concept when considering games and play. In this context, toys are objects or representation of objects that have their own implicit rules but do not come with explicit rules as standard. Game designer Chris Crawford neatly describes the nature of toys in a series of dichotomies he created to define games [7].

“If no goals are associated with a plaything, it is a toy.”

Examples would be a ball, a stick, a Transformer, etc. You can play with them in any manner you chose, confined only by the toy’s own rules: effect of gravity, shape, fragility etc.

If you throw a ball, depending on the material the ball is made from, it might bounce, it might roll, or it might stop dead. These are not rules that the person playing imposes on the ball. If you throw a Transformer in the same way as a ball, it will obey its own rules. It will not bounce and will probably break when you throw it at a wall!

There is another type of toy worth mentioning – I refer to it as a playground or a toy box; often you will hear them called sandboxes. This is an entire environment rather than a single object.

When you examine a game such as *Minecraft* in the creator mode, you are in a virtual world that has its own implicit rules for how the world behaves. This world has constraints that you as the player have to abide by.

How far you can dig down, how far you can build up, how certain blocks behave with other blocks and more.

However, within those constraints, you can do what you want. You can use the world itself as a toy and play with it. That can include turning the world into the setting for a game!

Going back to my daughter's experiences. At first, they would just play with the toys, they would not create any discernible rules around how they interacted with the toys. After a while, that was no longer enough. It was not fun just to throw bricks at the wall; they started to add rules to the play like stacking them as high as they could or lining up the colours. The free-form play now had structure – it had become a simple game.

Games

Like play, games have many, many definitions. To illustrate this, here are just a few!

“[...] 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” [8]

Marvin Minsky

“The voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” [9]

Bernard Suits

“A series of meaningful choices” [10]

Sid Meier

“A game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude.” [11]

Jesse Schell

“A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.”

[12]

Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen

“A structured experience with rules and goals that is fun.”

Amy Jo Kim

Simply put, play begins to become a game when you start to add explicit goals and impose system-based rules.

If I kick the ball through a goal, I get a point and I win (Zero sum). If we work together to get the ball through a series of obstacles, we win (non-Zero sum). For some, this will boil down to competition either with the system or with other players, cooperation, or collaboration.

You can summarise the three important distinctions between games and play as:

- Prelusory goals: Games have goals to achieve as set by an external source such as the game designer.
- Lusory means: Games have rules that define how you must achieve these prelusory goals.
- Constitutive rules: Games have rules that create challenges that must be completed to achieve goals. Rather than going from A to B in a straight line, you must overcome obstacles and solve puzzles going A to Z to E to B and back again!

Bringing It All Together

Put simply, the relationships between games, play and toys can be written like this;

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

Figure 1 is my attempt to summarise all of this as neatly as possible.

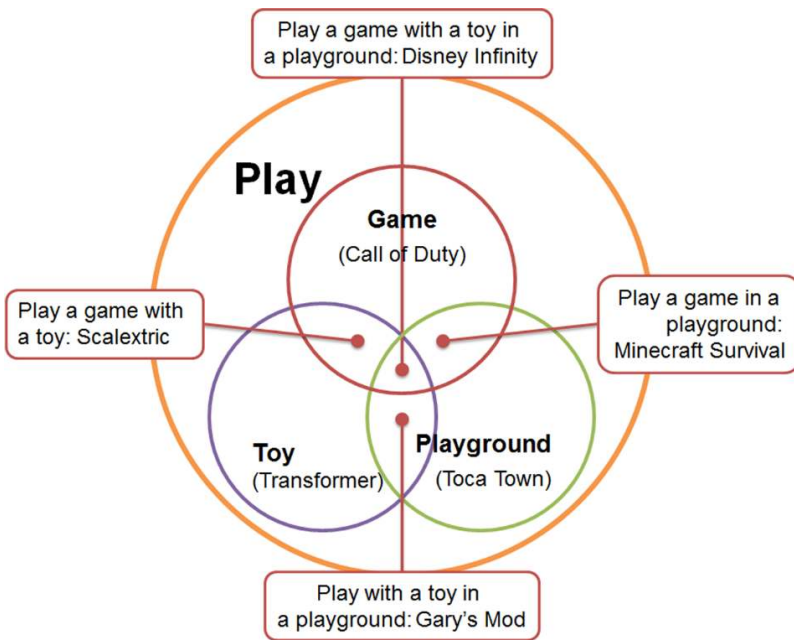


Figure 1 Play, Games and Toys

Play in Context

The concept of play is very important to me. I feel that it is one of the true keys to engagement in adults, but it often seems that adults often have no idea how to play. They have the intrinsic desire to play battered out of them by the “real” world. Unlike children, they often don’t see the potential for play in the world around them. Some blame work for this – they often say that the opposite of play is work. However, I prefer to go with Dr Stuart Brown’s (founder of the National Institute of Play) analysis in this case, that the opposite of play is actually depression [13].

Work is actually very similar to play and even more like games. The main difference is perception. We speak about lusory attitude a lot where play and games are concerned. As mentioned earlier, this is where you approach a non-play situation with a playful attitude. Just this change in mindset can change your perception of a situation. Therefore, with the right attitude, work can seem much more playful or gameful (note – these are not the same thing!!!)

Playfulness vs Gamefulness

First and foremost, Playfulness and Gamefulness both need a safe environment. Playfulness requires a great deal of freedom and a lack of explicit rules imposed by the system or environment. In contrast, Gamefulness is a little less freeform, there are explicit rules that are maintained by the system.

Play Sits Between Chaos and Control

Over the years I have concluded that play sits between chaos and control in the context of the world within which play is occurring. It is not totally without rules, but it is also not totally beholden to them.

However, as I dove deeper into thinking about where play sits in our understanding of the world and how we react to it. I realised that it is not quite as simple as chaos and control, it also had a lot to do with intent. Did we explicitly mean to do something or is it more implicit in nature? It occurred to me that play also sits between implicit and explicit desires and actions. We play at a conscious and subconscious level.

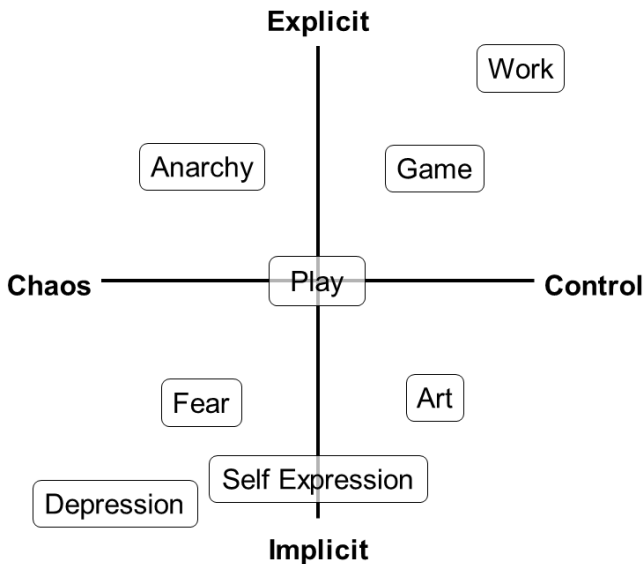


Figure 2 Play in Context

I mapped out a few other concepts to give this more context. For instance, I see anarchy as a deliberate act that leads to chaos. **Art** is implicit to the artist, that is it comes from the soul. However, the artist must have a level of control from the artist. They must get their ideas down in a way that fits their vision. That takes control.

Fear is an internal emotion that often comes from a lack of control – from chaos, not understanding what is happening around us. And we all know what fear leads to (puts on a *Yoda Voice*) “*Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.*” At the far end of this, we find **depression**, a complete loss of all control in every way.

Self-expression is also internal but sits between chaos and control. Think of an artist who covers themselves in paint and rolls around on a sheet of paper. Whilst they have an idea and have some level of control – there is a random, chaotic nature to it as well.

At the other end of the scale, we have **games**. They have a much more explicit control of the player’s experience. The reason this is not at the far top right is because there the player still has some freedom in most, if not all, games. However, with **work**, this seems to be much less the case – especially in more “traditional” jobs. Explicit Control rules!

As you can finally see, **Play** sits somewhere in the middle of all of this. It is implicit, explicit, chaotic and controlled all at once. Hey, I didn’t say it was simple!

So What?

This is all very philosophical, but there is a useful point to this. To get the best out of people you need to allow them a level of autonomy, but not so much that it descends into chaos, There also needs to be a level of control, but not so much that they are unable to make decisions for themselves. This balance helps to give them the freedom they need, within a framework that supports them.

Types of Rules in Play and Games

As mentioned, play is not devoid of rules. It is just that the rules seem less obvious to the observer. When talking about play, this perceived lack of rules is often emphasised as a big difference between games and play. Not everyone is quite as black and white on that, myself included. What play lacks is what I refer to as system rules. It is still beholden to other types of rules, what I am now calling inherent rules and meta-rules.

Inherent Rules

Inherent rules are those rules that affect play or toys in ways that are not controlled by outside influences; such as a player or a game designer. For instance, a ball has several inherent rules.

It is affected by gravity, it has mass, volume, wind resistance etc. These things are all inherent to the ball.

In a game like Minecraft, the inherent rules of the game would include how high you can build, how deep you can dig, what you must combine to make certain objects. The player plays within these inherent rules.

System Rules

System rules are rules that are added by the player or the designer that are there to create the game. If you are bouncing a ball seemingly aimlessly, this could be considered play. The inherent rules control the activity more than anything. How high the ball can bounce, for example? If you then decided that you must bounce the ball as high as you can and catch it with your left hand, you are adding system rules, you are creating a simple game. You are deliberately adding an obstruction to just bouncing the ball and catching it!

Meta-Rules

These are rules that go beyond what you would consider written or system-imposed rules. These are fluid rules that can change moment by moment. These are the rules that define how play unfolds.

They are the unspoken rules that children manage to communicate to each other when they are playing. The situation is constantly changing, but they always seem to be able to adapt to the changes without fuss. Mrs Dawkin's tea party takes a sinister turn as Action Man invades and takes Teddy Ruckspin hostage.

These are rules about rules, rules beyond rules, unspoken rules, unwritten rules and quite frankly – unfathomable rules to those not involved directly in the play!

Toys/Play/Games

I don't consider just games and play on their own, I always include toys. Toys can be an essential part of games and play. Toys are just objects.

They have inherent rules, as I said earlier, but really, they must have other rules associated with them to be included in play and games. A ball does not play with itself and is certainly not a game without some kind of system rules. On their own, they just have inherent rules.

Play, as discussed has inherent rules and these meta-rules. Games have system rules as well as inherent rules. A toy can exist without play or games, play can exist without toys or games. Games, however, must have play to exist.

In diagrammatic form (as is my way) this looks a bit like the following

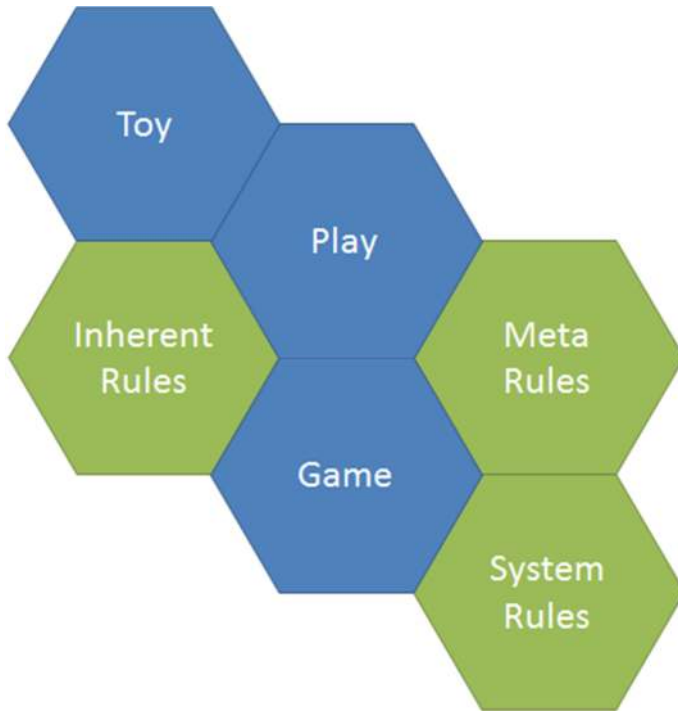


Figure 3 Play, Toys and Games

Inherent rules affect games, play and toys. Meta-rules affect play, and in turn games (you can't have a game without play!). Finally, system rules that only affect games.

The Meta-Rules of Play

Having introduced the concept of Meta-Rules, it seems sensible to expand on them a little. As a reminder, these were the non-system or inherent rules that guide how people play.

I have broken them down into four categories; social, contextual, communication and personal.

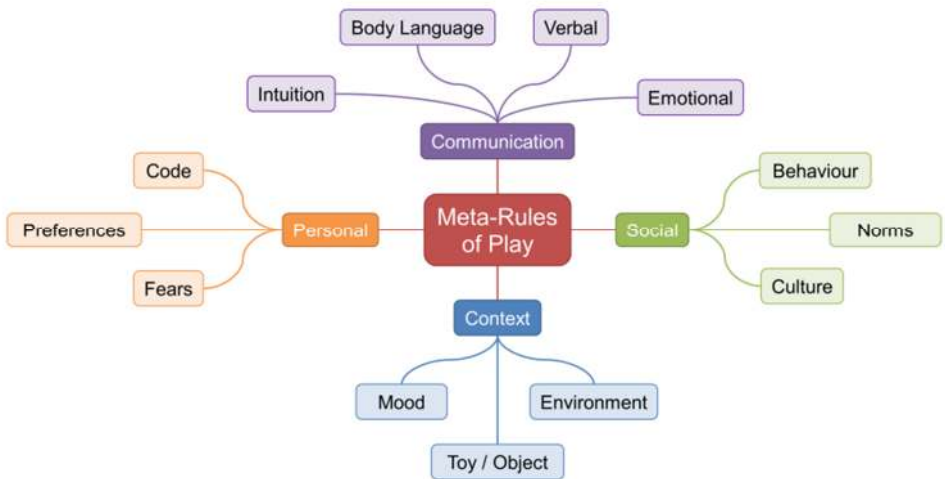


Figure 4 The Meta Rules of Play

Communication

Communication and empathy play an enormous part in collaborative play. I have identified four types that help to control play.

- **Verbal**
 - The most obvious form of communication – yelling instructions or updates!
- **Intuition**
 - Sensing how others are reacting to you and those around them, that feeling that you know something has changed based on subtle hints from others.
- **Body Language**
 - Almost as unsubtle as verbal communication, you can tell what other people playing are feeling with how they appear. Crossed arms, looking unhappy, looking to the left to indicate where you should go next etc.
- **Emotional**
 - A layer on top of other types of communication and similar in style to intuition, emotional communication is understanding the emotional subtext of other types of communication. A player may communicate in a happy way, but there could be other underlying emotions.

Social

Social meta-rules are more about what society expects. When playing, there are some things that others don't expect – based on social rules.

Whilst I have broken these down into three headings, they are all linked. There is an expected behaviour based on culture and the norms for that culture.

For instance, if you are play acting mummy's and daddy's, it would be very unexpected by most cultural norms and standards for one player to jump up and start pretending to shoot all the others!

Context

Play is contextual, it can change depending on where people are, what they are playing with and how they feel.

- **Environment**

- What are the surroundings whilst playing? How does that affect what can and can't be done? It's the difference between playing catch in a field and catch on a cliff edge!

- **Mood**

- The mood of the people playing can change rapidly, this can then change the emphasis of play and how others react to play. If you are playing alone with dolls and are happy, you may be making up stories of going to the beach. If you are sad or have been traumatised, your play acting may take a darker turn.

- **Toy / Object**

- If you are playing with a toy of some sort, that can drastically change what you are playing. It may be fun to bounce a ball off a wall, but less so if you are then handed a wooden block instead!

Personal

Everyone is different and what they find enjoyable or fun is also very different. Each person has their own preferences, personal code (i.e. moral code or code of conduct) and of course fears.

- **Code**

- This is what a player is prepared to do based on their own moral judgement. Some kids may not want to be involved in certain types of play, just as adults may not! This will guide how they react during play and the ever-changing meta-rules!

- **Preferences**

- As I say, not everyone is the same. Some may like to play with a ball, others would prefer to act out plays with dolls.

- **Fears**

- Fear is a great motivator. That example of playing catch on a cliff. I would not do it, but some might!

A lot of things in life are very game-like in nature, especially work. There are strict rules about how tasks must be completed. Completion of tasks and compliance with rules is rewarded (you get paid), breaking these rules leads to negative consequences (reprimands, warnings, getting fired).

What we don't see very often is the more play-like side of games being included in real-world tasks such as work. The lack of structure, the freedom to experiment and more importantly, to fail, are all missing.

Very often what we are doing in gamification is trying to inject some more play into these types of system. Elements that are fun just because they are fun, simulated environments to allow failure and learning in safety, more freedom to experiment and innovate etc. Of course, on top of that, we are adding elements that make things feel a bit more like a game. Adding new purpose, rapid feedback, increased interactivity, concentrating on Flow (explained later) and more.

As an adult, with children of my own, it is interesting to see how adults deal with situations that children find simple. I have seen grown men reduced to arguments in projects because no one set certain rules. For some reason, their mature ways of thinking have evolved to preclude imagination totally. If they are not told exactly what to do, they just can't cope and think their way out of a situation they have not been programmed to deal with.

Creating a Play-Like Environment

As discussed already, in play, the goals are often less defined or not consciously apparent. Whilst there may be rules that dictate how play progresses: social rules, physical rules and so on, they are not there to be deliberately challenging or to make play harder.

To make activities more play-like, you need to drop system rules and goals as much as possible, whilst creating a safe environment.

Part of what makes play so compelling is that there is a reduced level of real danger to the participants. Animals playing do not tend to hurt each other deliberately; they know that it is play. Kids playing are not afraid of the tower they are building falling. It may be annoying, but it is not going to get them in trouble or cause any real issues. Even in games, dying is often just a matter of losing a life – you can start again.

More importantly is that failure leads to learning and improving performance next time, but only if failure does not lead to a harmful punishment.

In the real world, this all seems a little unrealistic. What company is going to let people just go off and do their own thing without fear of failure? Well, Google for one. You may remember the 80/20 rule they made so famous a few years ago [14]? The idea was that 20% of an employee's time could be spent working on their own ideas and concepts. They did not have to produce anything, as long as they were trying. There was no punishment if their experiments failed, but if they succeeded, they could find a great deal of support. Products like Gmail came out of this, just as an example.

It may not seem like play, but it has play-like elements. There are no system/company set goals (Make a product). There are no rules set by the system/company that make it harder (only use the letter E once per line of code) or system/company defined obstacles (Do it by Friday and within budget). There is a safe environment as failure is not punished and there is no expectation of success. Also, and this is massively important, they had autonomy – they could choose what they wanted to work on and were trusted to get on with it.

This is the application of play for practical purposes. Considering play is generally not a practical form of anything, this should be fairly counter-intuitive and thus awesome!

On the flip side, my eldest daughter in the absence of rules just tries stuff. If it doesn't work, she tries something else. She learns as she goes, knowing that each failure just gives her one less thing to try next time. Sure, it can lead to frustration and tears, but that doesn't stop her trying again.

Sometimes we need rules and fixed experiences, sometimes we just need to be allowed to try things for ourselves – exercise our imaginations.

Remind adults how to play, let them explore and give them a level of freedom and autonomy. I am not suggesting you give them an open sandbox at work and a \$6,000,000 budget to blow but give them a chance to experiment and get things wrong.

Let them play!

Practical Play

Trust

Trust is massively important in any type of play, practical or otherwise. You have to trust other players and the environment within which you are playing. This is a judgement free zone.

Safe Environment

Following on from trust, the safe environment is another huge part of play. In a more practical setting, we are looking for an environment that does not punish failure and where there is no expectation of success (or at least no expectation that you are right or wrong, just that you will learn!)

Autonomy

Autonomy is important because you can't be forced to play! You need to allow people to approach everything in their own way and allow experimentation and creativity in solving problems.

No Predefined Obstacles

Contrary to popular belief, play is not devoid of rules, however, the rules are more meta or implicit in play. Think of them as the difference between gravity being an implicit rule compared to “you can only touch the ball with a funny stick to get it in the hole”, which is a much more explicit rule and indeed a predefined obstacle.

Dynamic Goals

Play doesn't usually have specific goals, but practical play does need some. There may be an overall goal, such as "Design a new process for doing expenses". During the practical play though, goals need to be adaptable, fluid and dynamic. No waterfall project managers here, please!

Lusory Attitude

This is probably the most essential element. Lusory attitude is just a playful mindset, approaching the task with an open and playful frame of mind. Coming to the table with a "this is stupid" attitude will not help at all. Be open to the experiences.



Figure 5 The Practical Play Framework

References

- [1] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play -- element in culture*. 1950.
- [2] “Ludic - definition of ludic in English from the Oxford dictionary,” *Oxford Dictionaries*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/ludic>. [Accessed: 05-Sep-2015].
- [3] D. Parlett, “What’s a ludeme?” [Online]. Available: <http://www.davidparlett.co.uk/gamester/ludemes.html>. [Accessed: 04-Jul-2015].
- [4] G. Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 1972, pp. 177–193.
- [5] E. Goffman, “Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience,” *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 10, no. 1. p. 60, 1981.
- [6] K. Hirsh-Pasek and R. M. Golinkoff, “Why play= learning,” *Encycl. Early Child.*, no. d, pp. 1–7, 2008.
- [7] C. Crawford, *Chris Crawford on Game Design*, vol. 2006, no. September 20. 2003.
- [8] M. Minsky, “Jokes and the Cognitive Unconscious,” in *Cognitive Constraints on Communication - Representations*, L. Vaina and J. Hintikka, Eds. Reidel, Boston, 1984, pp. 175–200.
- [9] B. Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, 18th ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Pres, 2005.
- [10] A. Rollings and D. Morris, *Game Architecture and Design*. 1999.
- [11] J. Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A book of lenses*. Morgan Kauffmann, 2008.

- [12] K. Salen and E. Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Fundamentals of Game Design*, vol. 37. 2004.
- [13] B. Sutton-Smith, “The opposite of play is not work — it is depression,” *Stanford Neurosciences Institute*, 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://neuroscience.stanford.edu/news/opposite-play-not-work---it-depression>. [Accessed: 16-Jan-2017].
- [14] B. Mediratta and J. Bick, “The google way: Give engineers room,” *New York Times, October*. New York Times, pp. 21–22, 2007.

This is an extract from [**Even Ninja Monkeys Like to Play: Unicorn Edition**](#), available from Amazon!