CCDN 331 Live Theory
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Playing By Heart: Play as an Ecological Design Perspective

Play is an essential and profound mode of the human condition. An apparatus that moulds our minds and gives us experience to handle the unexpected outcomes life throws our way. It teaches us to embrace failure in order to explore and to collaborate; for it is the journey that is the reward, not the outcome. This realisation highlights the current disparity between the short-term competitive goals found in industrialised institutions and that of the human psyche and the long term prosperity of society. An industrial complex favours pursuit of an abstract idealism of efficiency and price as the mechanism for and measure of progress. A goal that sacrifices much that is human and free-rides on the environment, treating both as externalities - hidden costs not borne directly by the producer but by society as a whole, sacrificing worker morale, time, social engagement, materials and the environment in order to pursue maximum profit. Play as defined by industrialisation would be categorised as waste. It is experimental and malleable, it selects for resiliency rather than efficiency. In some cases, the act of being engaged in a state of play is more pleasurable than the satisfaction of finishing; nothing satisfies us more than hard work that we choose for ourselves (McGonigal 2011). The processes play indulges us in is paramount to finding new ways of ecological living and means of production that are beneficial to us in the long run.

Through the trials and tribulations that the process of natural selection bestows upon any species, humans have developed a unique intelligence; an intelligence bred through the social interactions that occur among ourselves. Born out of our murderous tendencies, humans learned that to cooperate with each other led to a greater chance of survival and in turn developed as an outliving trait bred into our surviving ancestors (Schneier 2012). Much of this trust and cooperation is drawn from either mutualism, where unrelated individuals work together to accomplish tasks unattainable by themselves, or through limiting their behaviour, such as male infighting over a female, contests and so forth. These activities are non-lethal but enable valuable learning tools between members of a species. It allows for learning after failure without the fatal repercussions, strengthening us for future instances where this new knowledge may mean the difference between life or death. It is this principle that play is built upon; play is a method of experimentation. Much of the mechanisms of evolution such as redundancy, flexibility, quirkiness and unpredictability are common aspects of play, suggesting a biological relationship (Sutton-Smith 1997).

Play has many defining characteristics that make it hard to define under one perspective. In her essay What is Play? Gwen Gordon (2008) discovers the far reaching and cross-disciplinary nature of play by investigating a broad array of categories such as psychology, philosophy, anthropology and evolutionary biology. Through her research, she comes to define play as the voluntary movement across boundaries, exposing players to the unexpected in order to make transformation possible. "Playfulness carries the presence, flexibility, and openness needed to improvise with and expand the stream of possibilities as they emerge in each moment" (Gordon 2008). Paradoxically, play is highly generative despite play's purpose of generating more play; the processes and moulding play orchestrates on the mind makes it a necessary biological and evolutionary aspect of the human

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condition responsible for the proliferation of our species both in the past and the future. With this in mind, we must surgically examine the structure of today's industrialised world and how its functions are disjointed with the goals of the people that keep it afloat.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Or does it? Right from our childhood we are taught that there exists a clear distinction between work and play. Play is seen as aimless and recreational by the industrialised world. It holds no value to our current modes of living as they stand today even though the benefits of play are far reaching beyond the mere bounds of consumption and efficiency. By ignoring the characteristics and long standing beneficial role play has had in the success of our species we ignore what we as humans need to function and subsequently live in away that is detrimental to others and the environment. It is a distinction bred into generations since the dawn of the industrial age for the purposes of creating efficiency. Play is often seen as work's antonym but this couldn't be any farther from the truth. The opposite of play isn't work, its depression (Sutton-Smith). By ignoring play in our lives we are subsequently more susceptible to depression which provides new insight into our daily lives.

The evidence is there for all to see as the marketing and communications company JWT demonstrates in their study of the role of play today in (2012). Over 50% of those surveyed in the study in both the United States and Great Britain, people feel as if they don't do anything for fun anymore and over 90% agree that play should have a larger role in adult life too. The current structure of how we go about our lives are out of sync with our desires and psychological needs as human beings. More people are becoming dissatisfied with the reality they find themselves in and as a result turn to ways in order to escape it. Jane McGonigal documents this phenomenon in her book Reality is Broken (2011) with respect to video games and why people are drawn to spending countless hours in virtual worlds.

For the average person, hard work is often defined as work that we do because we have to do it in order to make a living or meet someone else's expectations causing stress. In other cases, work for some may be too easy and so we become bored, feel underutilised and unappreciated. McGonigal argues that because of the stress and/or boredom our lives undergo we constantly seek to suppress and reverse our negative feelings usually with easy to invest tasks such as television, eating or drugs. The problem with this she notes is that by engaging in "easy fun" we often delve further into the symptoms of stress, from boredom to depression. She argues that there is a better way to living through a change in the structure of our lives and goals; a structure that video games thrive on.

Games are carefully constructed environments that initiate play. They orchestrate events and challenges that we voluntarily participate in that put our personal strengths to work. The better the game has been designed, the more players are pushed to the edge of their skill level. "Games make us happy because they are hard work we choose for ourselves and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work." (McGonigal 2011). They give us space to flex our talents and experiment without the consequences that reality brings. Play has no purpose, to ascribe

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purpose to play is to remove the enjoyment out of it; games are catalysts for play that mediate it in way that creates useful byproducts beyond the sake of proliferating play itself. Through the combination of self derived goal setting, carefully considered constraints and personalised challenge, our subconsciousness is transported to a new reality called flow (Czikscentmihalyi, 1991). Flow is the state of mind we enter when enter an equilibrium is met between the difficulty of the challenges we accomplish and that of our own skill level. Its virtues are compelling and we are intrinsically motivated to participate in it. The best games are the ones that allow their players to slip into a state of flow. They give us purpose and enjoyment that the reality we are trying to escape sorely lacks. Why should these features be exclusive to games alone?

Play has deep biological underpinnings bred through evolutionary practices in order to adapt with nature that have helped us survive as a species. Games and their design philosophies can be used in the context of our daily lives and work structures to inject play as a fundamental part of our survival, develop cooperative rather than competitive tendencies and remove the disconnect between our natural life desires and the artificial ones industrial complex constricts us too. It is industrialisation that lead to and maintains a disparity between what we as humans desire and need in everyday life to function in favour of efficiency; the sacrifice of well-being and standards for the sake of maximisation in material profit. "The great conceit of the industrial world is the belief that we are exempt from the laws that govern the rest of creation" (Orr 2002).

The industrialist mantra of the past century has established a system where in order to survive, consumption and growth are paramount to what is seen as a successful society when the reality is a short lived and shallow result. In his essay The Design of Culture and the Culture of Design, environmentalist David W. Orr (2002) explores the many ways industrialisation has ravaged many different cultures and landscapes with its disregard of traditions, the human condition and natures all encompassing influence on how our lives should be led. He draws his examples for change from varying cultures outside of the reach of western globalisation and how their intimate knowledge of the land determined their lifestyles into sustainable, self-maintained, tight-knit communities. It is out of this shared environment that cooperation amongst themselves generates new knowledge; an environment that facilitates failure and experimentation that results in resiliency rather than efficiency. An environment that facilitates many of the same ingredients that enable play; what is life if it is not a game?

Our current systems and ways of living are so entrenched within each other that in order to instigate radical change is unviable. We are currently at an impasse where to continue our way of living will eventually collapse in on itself and to change it completely would be too slow and expensive. In order to move forward we need to adapt our way of living, to change behaviours and determine a new sense of value in what we strive for in our lives (Orr 2002). One of the ways we can instigate this change is through play and its consideration in the design process of new systems, objects and platforms in order to move forward to a future where people and the world we live in grow, rather than our pocket.

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Initiating change in a heavily entrenched system is difficult but not impossible as the pervasive nature of play can demonstrate. In fact, play is incorporated in to many leading, creative businesses today and as result owe many of their successes to their unique strategies. Google notoriously allows for a fair amount of freedom for their workforce with what Google calls '20% Time' which is arguably one of their most influential practices (Ayala, Vaughn 2012). 20% Time lets workers spend a day of every working week on whatever they desire allowing for passion projects, or self-chosen hard work. Google's work culture helps these ideas come to fruition with the help of fellow employees allowing amoebic progression of ideas that have led to some of Google's most successful services such as Gmail and Google News. Pixar, like Google, encourages its employees to unwind and play with ideas by using playful methods of engagement (Ayala, Vaughn 2012). Pixar's headquarters uses specially designed spaces and layouts, like hidden and themed rooms, to encourage unorthodox thinking and capitalise on random encounters between people from different departments that under normal circumstances wouldn't usually meet to generate ideas and perspectives that are more unconventional. The environment that Pixar and Google provide in their workplaces subtly instil a behavioural change that expands upon the cubicle-work ethic to generate a more creatively productive workplace for the benefit of both the company and the employee.

On top of new and emerging work ethics being brought to the already existing workplace there are other companies whose strategies fit into current economic models that are completely non-conventional yet resoundingly successful. The video game company Valve is such an example. Valve exhibits no hierarchical structure, there are no bosses but the employees themselves; every employee is self directed and chooses whatever they want to work on and who they want to work with (Varoufakis 2012). Their desks are self contained units with wheels attached to the bottom allowing employees to move and work where-ever they please. The work environment that Valve creates for its employees is optimised in such a way that through choosing their own work, employees are geared towards achieving flow. They aren't hampered by the prospect of failure, they embrace it and the organic flow mediated through amoebic cooperation ensures greater success with their outcomes. Because Valve establishes a tight community among its workers, they all benefit from each others successes, as their wealth of knowledge is shared and passed amongst themselves. Valve's work infrastructure is heavily influenced by the principles of play that has succeeded commercially and critically.

Ponoko, Adafruit, Sparkfun, Esty and the entire Maker Movement are other examples of how traditional modes of production are turned on their head in favour of the playful community. Their approach heralds a new form of wealth creation via loosely constructed collaborative networks known as Peer-Production (Benkler 2006). Ponoko as one example facilitates a vast global network of creators, fabricators and users. Ponoko forms a virtual community that all contribute as an alternative to mass manufacturing. Users can allow others through Ponoko access manufacturing tools and designs to create or customise their own objects, giving people the opportunity to experiment with the different tools and to learn and establish new methods of manufacture. Adafruit

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designs and sells various electronics components to the maker community. Designed for the hacker, the components are simple, cost effective and entirely open-sourced so that their community can build upon their own designs freely. On a mission to make advanced electronics more accessible to people, Adafruit's endeavour to help their customers learn through play by "creating more value than they capture" (O'Reilly 2009). Ponoko and Adafruit both create a community of makers all involved in the process of making for the sheer joy of it, designing their products and services to cater for a simple desire to explore, collaborate and learn setting voluntary individual or group challenges that are born out of play.

Our minds are geared towards responding to our environment through play. It is biological, it has a connection to our evolutionary success as a species. In today's realm of technology, we have the power to shape our own evolutionary course and the prosperity of our future. Our survival depends on a mutually beneficial relationship with the world around us. We must remember why we have proliferated as a species and what this knowledge can teach us. Play and the environments that enable it are that answer. It entices cooperation, tests flexibility, redundancy and rewards failure in the name of resiliency. But most of all, we enjoy participating in it; it is this simple act of participation in play that brings us joy and progress. Many of the current chosen future proofing initiatives such as green consumerism are mere improvised bandages driven by an economy grown too indifferent to real human needs, ignoring the pressing problems that question the long-term survival of the human species (Orr 2002).

Play is the new direction. Companies such as Valve, Google and Pixar prove that with play at the forefront in the design of new paradigms and structures, we can create better business practices and lives for people to engage in. The current connected culture of today has brought new shifts in the way we relate to one another but now we are at an impasse. Much of our progress is strained and held back by the grip of archaic industrialised institutions struggling to hold on. Play can help direct us toward a new destination and sociological structure. Services such as Ponoko and Adafruit are a glimpse into how the future of our online existence can enable us to create resilient, intelligent, self sustaining communities. These global, localised communities are where the aspects of play thrive, bringing the tools, structure and mindset necessary to allow the adaptation of human sociality into a better relationship with nature. The world has and will continue to exist with or without us; our evolutionary role with nature has been defined by our ability to cooperate and the power of play is pivotal to this. In order to transcend self-interest and develop a symbiotic relationship with ourselves and the world around us we need to understand what enabled our success as a species in the first place. We must implement this knowledge into future practices and in the process, redefine the terms of progress for a better future. With play in mind, we can do just that.

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