

Play Matters

MIGUEL SICART

playful THINKING SERIES

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1 Play Is

Think about play, and what it means to you.

What comes to mind? A pastime? Games? Childhood activities? The opposite of work? A source for learning? What you'd rather be doing now?

Think again: How much do you know about play?

Let's start with a simple exercise. List your daily activities, the tasks that structure your day, from work to leisure to those things you have to do that are neither, yet you *have to* do them.

How do you do these tasks? If you are happy and well rested, you may approach your day in a playful way, enjoying what you do. Happiness may give you time to play, to live in a different way. The temptation of enjoying and living life through play, of having fun, is always present.

To play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human.

We live in exciting times. You might have encountered the argument that games are now everywhere¹; that intellectuals, artists, policymakers, and institutions are games for serious and trivial purposes. You might have also read that games will be "the dominant cultural form of the XXI Century."² There is even

talk among game developers of the twenty-first century being “the ludic [as in, play-centric] century.”³

I disagree, to a certain extent. Games don’t matter. Like in the old fable, we are the fools looking at the finger when someone points at the moon. Games are the finger; play is the moon.

What is true is that play is a dominant way of expression in our First World societies. We play games, but also *with* toys, *on* playgrounds, *with* technologies and design. And play is not just the ludic, harmless, encapsulated, and positive activity that philosophers have described.⁴ Like any other form of being, play can be dangerous; it can be hurting, damaging, antisocial, corrupting. Play is a manifestation of humanity, used for expressing and being in the world.

To understand what play is, I propose here a portable theory, or rhetoric, of play. Instead of deriving an understanding of play from a particular object or activity, like war, ritual, or games, I see play as a portable tool for being. It is not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life.

Why propose a theory of play now? In our culture, *playful* has become a positive word. The author of the 2011 biography of Steve Jobs uses *playful* as a word of praise for the design of Apple computers, originally conceived to contrast with dull corporate machines.⁵ Apple’s “playful” design appropriated cues from an understanding of play as a personal expression: beauty, counter-cultural politics, and moral values. That is the value and place of play in our culture.

Despite its importance, we are still trying to understand play with models inherited from the past. Our theories are mostly derived from the work of Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, who famously coined the concept of *Homo Ludens*.⁶ This

book is not written in the tradition of Huizingan play, understood as a fair contest that creates a separate world with rules that are never questioned. The nature of play I am advocating for here is different from that of Huizinga.

I am not going to oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or sports because it exists in all of them. It is a way of being in the world, like languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth.⁷

And play is not necessarily fun. It is pleasurable, but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing. Let's not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, opening us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world.

Play can be dangerous too:⁸ it can be addicting and destructive and may lead to different types of harm—physical injuries, lost friendships, emotional breakdowns. Play is a dance between creation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism. Playing is a fragile, tense activity, prone to breakdowns. Individual play is a challenge to oneself, to keep on playing. Collective play is a balancing act of egos and interests, of purposes and intentions. Play is always on the verge of destruction, of itself and of its players, and that is precisely why it matters. Play is a movement between order and chaos.⁹ Like tragedy, it fulfills its expressive purpose when it manages a fragile, oscillating balance between both. This echoes the concept of dark play,¹⁰ exploring the boundaries between play and not play, between performance and secrecy.¹¹ Dark play, with its potential dangers and exhilarating results, is another example of the nature of play as a way of being in the world—a dangerous one.

Play is carnivalesque too.¹² Play appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them, or

make them deadly serious. The carnival of the Middle Ages, with its capacity to subvert conventions and institutions in a suspension of time and power,¹³ was a symptom of freedom.¹⁴ Carnivalesque play takes control of the world and gives it to the players for them to explore, challenge, or subvert. It exists; it is part of the world it turns upside down. Through carnivalesque play, we express ourselves, taking over the world to laugh at it and make sense of it too.

Think about the famous Twitter bot-not-bot *horse_ebooks*.¹⁵ Initially a spam bot, then a piece of automatic found art, and finally a piece of performance art, *Horse_ebooks* is the perfect example of carnivalesque—dangerous play and playfulness in this age of computing machinery. By taking over a social situation and technology, this (not)-bot-come-art piece played with our expectations, broke our hearts, and showed us a new way of seeing the world and understanding ourselves. *Horse_ebooks* was appropriated by a performance artist to explore new horizons by impersonating a twitter bot in Marina Abramovic-inspired durational arts. By faking being a bot, the artist Jacob Bakkila teased our perception of Twitter and the technologies to which we relinquish our entertainment. The sense of betrayal that some felt when *Horse_ebooks* was revealed to be human can be understood only as an example of carnivalesque dark play and the ways in which it can painfully enrich our lives.

This is also not a theory of play *through* games. Games don't matter that much. They are a manifestation, a form of and for play, just not the only one. They are the strongest form, culturally and economically dominant. But they are part of an ecology of playthings and play contexts, from toys to playgrounds, from political action to aesthetic performance, through which play is used for expression. This book explores this ecology, from

conventional computer and board games to sports, activism, critical engineering, interaction design, toys, and playgrounds. Play is the force that ties these cultural expressions together and makes them matter.

I am aware of both my ambition and the obvious limitations of what I can do. Mine is a romantic theory (or rhetoric) of play, based on an idea of creativity and expression that has been developed in the highly postromantic cultural environment of the early twenty-first century¹⁶. I write this theory of play as a reaction to the instrumentalized, mechanistic thinking on play championed by postmodern culture industries. This is a theory that acts as a call to playful arms, an invocation of play as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism.¹⁷

If and when this era passes, my theory will be rendered obsolete. But right now, we need to think about play matters and reclaim play as a way of expression, a way of engaging with the world—not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production. Like literature, art, song, and dance; like politics and love and math, play is a way of engaging and expressing our being in the world.

In fact, play is a fundamental part of our moral well-being, of the healthy and mature and complete human life. Through play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance.

We need play precisely because we need occasional freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society. Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits.

We play because we are human, and we need to understand what makes us human,¹⁸ not in an evolutionary or cognitive way but in a humanistic way. Play is the force that pulls us together. It is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves. Play is expressing ourselves—who we want to be, or who we don’t want to be. Play is what we do when we are human.

.....
So what *is* play?

For a long time, my day has been structured around play. Lego bricks and toy cars precede my breakfast, as *Drop7* and *SpellTower* lull me to sleep; *Noby Noby Boy* helps me wait by the printer, and *Desert Bus* accompanies me in academic meetings. My life takes place in the time between play. This is perhaps the reason I believe that play articulates time—that a day, a week, a month, and a year are just arbitrary segments that we use to keep track of the times we play.

Let me foolishly try to define what play is.¹⁹ Play, like any other human activity, is highly resistant to formalized understanding. Since I will fail too in trying to define it, I want to do so with a minimal definition of play, aware of its own fragile connection with a present time.²⁰ Let’s start, then, by understanding what play is.

*Play is contextual.*²¹ In a colloquial understanding of play, that context of play is the formally bound space determined by the rules and the community of play. But context is more complicated; it’s a messier network of people, rules, negotiations, locations, and objects. Play happens in a tangled world of people, things, spaces, and cultures.

An obvious example is provided by sports. The laws of soccer determine the space in which the game should be officially played: a “natural or artificial” surface, “according to the rules of

the competition" (law 1). But if we are to understand semiprofessional soccer, the context should also include the stadium or training grounds open to spectators, as well as the location of the grounds in the larger urban space. It is not the same to play pickup games of soccer in poor neighborhoods as it is in more affluent ones: the materiality of the game changes, and so do the interpretations of the rules and even the play styles.²²

Context comprises the environment in which we play, the technologies with which we play, and the potential companions of play.²³ Context is the network of things, people, and places needed for play to take place. A playground is a pure play context: a separated space devoid of any other functionality than being a context for playing. But it's also true that almost any space can become a playground.

How do we know that a particular context is a context for play? Often there are cues embedded in objects that signal that a space, thing, or collective are there to play. Masks and disguises, merry-go-rounds, and computer controllers all point to the idea that play is possible in that context. Players interpret spaces and situations as potentially open to play when they perceive those cues.²⁴

Artificially created objects or situations, then, can signal play. Play happens mostly in contexts designed for that activity.²⁵ It is important to understand that play, unlike other forms of expression, can be designed.²⁶ It is not designed exclusively in the Bauhaus-inspired tradition of a creator who shapes an object for a function,²⁷ but in a weaker sense: designed as mediated by things created to facilitate the emergence of play.

This is why play and computers get along so well. As universal machines, computers need to have instructions designed for them so they can execute an activity. Similarly, play requires a

certain element of design, material or contextual or both, so we know we can play, or we can be playful. This is why play thrives in the age of computing machinery.

A way of understanding how these contexts are designed is to think about rules. From the strictly observed rules of professional sports to the fluid and unstable rules of children's games, play and rules go together.²⁸ Rules are the formal instruments that allow the creation and shared identification of a context of play. All contexts of play have rules of some type.

Much has been written on the nature of rules, and it is not my intention here to explain or debate what rules are. Play is derived, mediated, and situated by the use of rules. A rule determines where we play, when we stop playing, and when we can reenter the play context. A rule is written on a piece of paper or in several lines of code, upheld by a referee or a piece of circuitry or a group of friends, or even history and spaces, like house rules.

Rules are facilitators that create a context of play, frames within which play takes place.²⁹ However, rules are only one element of the context of play, and not the most important. They are necessary but not sufficient for play to exist: players and a certain will to play are needed to engage in play.³⁰ More important, rules are not sacred.³¹ They are nodes in the complex network of the context of play, servants to the action of playing. Rules are another prop that can be targeted by the transformative capacities of play.³²

Traditionally rules have been seen as the only immutable element of play. If rules were broken, play would finish and whoever broke the rules would be morally guilty.³³ More modern takes on play see the rules as more flexible and interpretive.³⁴ Discussing and interpreting rules is a crucial part of the play activity. This negotiation consolidates the context of play. A key ingredient of

playing is thinking, manipulating, changing, and adapting rules. Rules, servant to the context, evolve while we play to address the necessities of particular play situations.

Play is also an activity in tension between creation and destruction.³⁵ Play is always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both. Play is between the rational pleasures of order and creation and the sweeping euphoria of destruction and rebirth, between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac.³⁶

For Nietzsche, tragedy summed up two colliding tensions in Greek culture: the culture of order and the culture of drunken disorder, the art of sculpture and the art of music. While artists moved between both, the genre of the Greek tragedy effectively merged both. The order and sobriety of the Apollonian was tensely opposed by the embodied, passionate, irrational, and irreverent Dionysiac art.³⁷

The Apollonian and Dionysiac tendencies explain how players navigate the context of play. When playing, we struggle to make sense of the world by constructing our actions within a context. That struggle is not only with the obstacles and needs that play imposes on us, but also with the permanent temptations that happen in play: the temptation of breaking the context, breaking the rules, corrupting play, or, on the opposite side, letting go of all the elements of rationality and structure and letting ourselves loose in the intoxicating pleasures of play.

Lego provides an example of this tension. When building something without following any plans or instructions, I sometimes feel the temptation to build the tallest possible structure, just to see it fall. I pile pieces on top of pieces, in precarious balance, just to reach the highest possible point. I then look at my oeuvre and push it. The pleasure of the wasted time, of the pieces

scattering as they hit the floor, is the pleasure of destructive play—the Dionysiac ending to my Apollonian world building.

Play is this struggle between order and chaos, between the will to create and the will to destroy.³⁸ Play as an affirmation of humanity occurs because we have to strive to balance it—to tie our demons and make them coexist with our passion for order³⁹ without falling in the mindless focus that lures us toward structured play.⁴⁰ We play by taking only moderately seriously the Apollonian structures of the game and not letting the intoxicating destruction deprive us of the virtues of submitting to order.

How do we keep the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac in order? How does play manage to explore and express without spiraling into its own destruction? In classic theories of play, the answer would be that playing is a pretense, requiring a particular attitude decoupled from reality, so it would always be possible for participants to disengage with the activity.⁴¹ But play is not detached from the world; it lives and thrives *in* the world. So how do we play between excessive order and compulsive destruction?

Play manages that balance because it is a carnivalesque activity.⁴² The carnival, as Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin described it, is an outcome of the expressive capacity of play,⁴³ managing the careful relations between creation and destruction.⁴⁴ Bakhtin's carnival is more than the time in which the power institutions of the Middle Ages allow the common people to express themselves through satire and humor.⁴⁵ The carnival foreshadows modernity—the rise of a critical, self-aware individual, a body with a mind not subject to institutions determined from another world, but from rationality itself.⁴⁶

Carnival lets laughter, not fun, happen. By temporarily dismissing the oppressive forces of the establishment, laughter

takes over and allows for a bodily form of knowledge that creates truth, and it's free. Laughter requires freedom, an opening from the institutional world, but it also creates freedom. Modernity could be a consequence of laughter, of the possibility of expression afforded in the carnival.⁴⁷ Laughter, critical and hurting and enjoyable and deeply embodied, makes carnivals matter.

Laughter and the carnival give us an instrument against seriousness, restoring the “ambivalent wholeness” that is opposite the institutions we live in.⁴⁸ Games are an example of carnivalesque behavior that leads to a festive liberation in search from freedom, expression, and truth.⁴⁹ Some games, like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, with its rowdy, physical performativity, or even the early *Grand Theft Auto* titles and its fascinating renderings of possible worlds, point to the importance of carnivalesque laughter in the construction and experience of play.⁵⁰ Again, the result is not fun but laughter—pleasurable but risky, and potentially harmful.

Play is carnivalesque. It finds equilibrium between creation and destruction in the embodied laughter. It also presents a number of characteristics that embody this carnivalesque tensions.

Play is appropriative, in that it takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by such context.

From the context of use of a toy to a game, from a ritual to a playground, context becomes servant to the activity of playing.⁵¹ Two physical games can serve as example: the game Ninja is often played in public spaces, from parking lots to the common areas of schools and dorms (figure 1.1).⁵² The rules of Ninja are simple: players make a circle, staying at arm's length from each other. At the count of three, players make a ninja pose, palms extended. The goal of the game is to hit any other players' open palms, and only the palms. If you're hit, you have to leave the game. The game continues until only one player is left. The

catch? It's a turn-based game, and only one swift move of attack and defense is allowed—no stopping, no flurry of gestures, just one move to attack or to defend in each turn. Ninja makes players take over a location, forming a circle that soon loses its form and spreads around the space, effectively conquering it. But Ninja also appropriates the space in a sociocultural way: what used to be a parking lot becomes a battlefield, reclaiming the ground for pleasure. And in the public space of a school or a workplace, Ninja can reclaim the importance of laughter to survive the long days of work and obligations. Ninja appropriates the spaces it takes place by means of its sprawling nature.

A more aesthetically oriented approach is provided by *Johan Sebastian Joust*,⁵³ also a physical game, in this case augmented through the use of technology: *Joust* is a nongraphics video game in which players hold a Playstation Move controller in their hands. The players' movements are determined by the tempo of music: if it is played at a high tempo, players can move quickly, and if it is played at a slow tempo, only careful movement is allowed. To win *Joust*, players need to shake any other players' controllers so much that they are eliminated. The intensity of the shaking is measured by the controllers' accelerometers and related to the tempo of the music, with the results calculated by the computer.

Joust does not appropriate the context by the sheer number of players but by a careful weaving of different aesthetic cues. The PlayStation Move controller that players wield has a glowing LED that gives players information about the state of the game.

Figure 1.1

Ninja takes over IT University. (Photo by Flickr user Joao Ramos. CC-By-NC 2.0. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/joaoramos/5621465814/sizes/o/>.)



Joust is also a music game, so it has to be heard, not just seen. And the game performs like a dance. Seeing *Joust* being played is like witnessing an impromptu dance with magical candlelight, reinterpreting mundane locations of play into performance spaces, mesmerizing players and spectators in a choreography of moving lights and playful exhilaration (figure 1.2).⁵⁴

The play object, be it a game or a toy, is just a prop for play. Regardless of all the intentions and meanings embedded in the design of play objects, play will always force us to contextualize the meaning of the things involved in playing. Play appropriates the objects it uses to come into existence.⁵⁵

Play is disruptive as a consequence of being appropriate. When it takes over the context in which play take place, it breaks the state of affairs. This is often done for the sake of laughter, for



Figure 1.2

JS Joust serious dueling. (Photo by Bennett Foddy. [http://www.foddy.net.](http://www.foddy.net/))

enjoyment, for passing pleasures. But like all other passing pleasures, play can also disruptively reveal our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes. In disrupting the normal state of affairs by being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it. And in that move, we reveal the inner workings of the context that we inhabit.

An interesting example of the potential disruptiveness of play is the activist performance Camover.⁵⁶ In Camover, players are encouraged to destroy CCTV cameras in a specific urban environment and are awarded points for doing so—the points are made available and visible on a website. This political (and illegal) action uses gamelike elements, such as points or the creation of a shared play community that evaluates the players' performance, to communicate a political message. Camover disrupts the urban context through violent and dangerous play, engaging with the political situation in the urban space where the play is taking place. As an intervention through play, Camover uses the appropriative nature of play to make a commentary on social and political actions as they take place.

The disruptive nature of play allows us to understand the perils of play as well. By disrupting the context in which it takes place, play is a creative, expressive force. But this force has its dangers too. Dark play is an exploration of the wild side of play in which players decide to engage in an activity, like Camover, to force an emotional response in those who do not recognize they are actually playing.⁵⁷ The disruptiveness of play is used to shock, alarm, and challenge conventions.⁵⁸

The disruptiveness of play can be extended to more dangerous realms too.⁵⁹ Play can disrupt our mental balance. It can be addictive through gambling, for example, buying lottery

tickets or playing slot machines designed for tempting our base impulses with a calculated chain of wins and losses.⁶⁰ The disruptiveness of play means that sometimes it's not the world we look at through the lens of play but an abyss—the profound contradictions and risks that our fragile minds accept taking. If we are only mildly tempted, we become spoilsports, cheaters;⁶¹ if we are deeply enthralled, we lose ourselves in play. Play is disruptive, and it can be dangerous through its disruptiveness.

Play is autotelic—an activity with its own goals and purposes, with its own marked duration and spaces and its own conditions for ending.⁶² This is a common point with conventional understandings of play.⁶³ However, the boundaries of autotelic play are not formally rigid; there is no clear demarcation between the world of the game and the world at large.⁶⁴ Play is autotelic in its context, but it is also negotiated. Its autotelic nature is always being discussed and negotiated. We play by negotiating the purposes of play, how far we want to extend the influences of the play activity, and how much we play for the purpose of playing or for the purpose of personal expression.

Play has a purpose of its own, but the purpose is not fixed. Play activities can be described as diachronically or synchronically autotelic, focusing on how the purpose of play evolved though the play session or looking at what particular purpose a particular instance of play had in a particular session. We can start playing with a purpose and decide to change our goals midway, either alone or in negotiation with others. Play negotiates its autotelic goals and purposes as part of playing.

Let's look at an example: the purpose of playing a game like *Vesper.5* that allows players to make only one move a day.⁶⁵ We don't play it for the action or for the way it entertains us. *Vesper.5* gives us a ritual that is play too. We play it to explore, to

learn about ourselves, because we find it interesting, because it has meaning for us and we let it in our lives every day: one move and then a twenty-four-hour wait. This exercise in patience—a game, yes, in which we play more than just the game—is also a companion, a timed excuse for playing every day. Its purpose is to exist, to let us play, and the purpose of playing with it is nothing else than just playing. Playing *Vesper.5* is also negotiating why and how we play this game.

Play is creative, in that it affords players different degrees of expression inherent in the play activity itself. Playing is both accepting the rules of the game and performing within them according to our needs, personality, and constitution of a playing community. Play is the act of creatively engaging with the world, with technologies, contexts, and objects, from games to toys and playgrounds, exploring them through ludic interaction.⁶⁶ Play creates its objects and communities. To play is to make a world, through objects, with others, for others, and for us. It is a creative way of expression, shared but ultimately personal. Play creates (itself) through objects, rules, players, situations, and spaces.

A good example of this type of expression is the development of tactics in games. When playing a game, players develop tactics, that is, temporally based interpretations of the context of play suited for particular modes of interaction toward particular goals; some of them may be a part of the game and some are purely personal. The tactics are the on-the-fly creative interpretation of a game through the activity of playing it.

Finally, *play is personal*. Even when we play with others, the effects of play are individual, attached to our own sentimental, moral, and political memories. Who we are is also who plays, the kind of person we let lose when we play. Our memories are

composed of these instances of play, the victories and defeats, but also the shared moments.⁶⁷ Play is not isolated in our eventful lives; in fact, it is a string with which we tie our memories and our friendships together. Play is a trace of the character that defines us.

Play is finding expression; it is letting us understand the world and, through that understanding, challenging the establishment, leading for knowledge, and creating new ties or breaking old ones. But ultimately whatever we do in play stays with us. Play is a singularly individual experience—shared, yes, but meaningful only in the way it scaffolds an individual experience of the world. Through play, we are in the world.⁶⁸

Play is like language—a way of being in the world, of making sense of it.⁶⁹ It takes place in a context as a balance between creation and destruction, between adherence to a structure and the pleasures of destruction.⁷⁰ Playing is freedom.⁷¹

Play is being in the world, through objects, toward others.⁷² We play not to entertain ourselves or to learn or be alienated: we play to be, and play gives us, through its characteristics, the possibility of being. As Sartre put it, “The desire to play is fundamentally the desire to be.”⁷³