



Play anywhere

Description

Computer games are undoubtedly big business. Currently 76% of children in Scotland (where I live) have a games console according to a recent [Ofcom](#) report, a figure that is surely on the increase. Does this trend constitute any kind of problem for health ([DVT](#)), domestic life or for society?

In the early days of the financial crisis commentators accused banks of playing roulette (a game of chance). Some drew parallels between computer games and targets in the Gulf War of 1990-91. War games and



Perhaps digitally-connected societies have trouble

separating play from reality. Kids (and kidults) are so absorbed in their computer gaming they think

it's ok to plough cars into pedestrians, burn and loot: *Grand Theft Auto* visits Peckham, Hackney, Birmingham, etc.

Reality tv turns dining, cooking, socialising, design, and gardening into contests, trivialising health, finance and learning, treating each as a game.

Many businesses and institutions seem to be re-modelling their formal systems of communication on digital social networks. Social networks blur into role play and operate as platforms for multi-user gaming (CityVille, Mafia Wars).

In spite of the popularity of the wii and Kinect that arguably introduce dynamic bodily movement, much computer gaming requires passive sitting, immobility, is highly mediated, and a distraction from outdoor healthy games. According to some critics, video games are mass market phenomena, and a preparation for rampant, unquestioning subjection to consumerism and capitalism (scoring, pricing, quantifying, competing).

But concern about games also derives from a concern about play itself. When people think of play it is generally as something separate from the serious business of work and making (*homo faber*).

The influential book by Johan Huizinga called *Homo Ludens*, man the player, provides the strongest antidote I know for the view that work comes ahead of play. For Huizinga, play is everywhere.

We are at our jobs the most when we are engaged in a play-like way. To put it more strongly, we are most at work when playing.

Play has several characteristics. Some scholars think it's low risk preparation for encounters with high risk situations further down the line. It's a means of exploring and developing trust. Courtship is a game. Play is a way of socialising and bonding. Sometimes play has rules (eg chess and tennis). Sometimes it's just messing about, in solitude or in company. It can be competitive and/or collaborative.

One of the major characteristics of play is that players are absorbed in the game, a state known well to musicians and performers. We are most at play when unselfconsciously engaged. In a self-help book on adopting a playful attitude, psychologist Stuart Brown says,

When we are fully engaged in play, we lose a sense of the passage of time. We also experience diminished consciousness of self. We stop worrying about whether we look good or awkward, smart or stupid. We stop thinking about the fact that we are thinking. In imaginative play, we can even be a different self. We are fully in the moment, in the zone.

In this light, 'serious' business is simply a condition where we momentarily emerge from our habitual state of play and think about accountability, responsibility, and contractual obligations. But for Huizinga these mercantile activities are also play in any case. He describes legal advocacy, diplomacy, war, ethics and education as manifestations of the play function in human societies.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer picks up on Huizinga's characterisation of play to account for the two-and-fro movement of interpretation. Interpreting, appreciating, criticising or otherwise engaging with a story, a painting, a building or a piece of music, involves this free flow between what

the work of art presents and our preconceptions.

The ability to interpret is part of what it is to be human, as is play. In this light the only real challenge posed by computer gaming is this: is this really play? Is it playing to the full?

Bibliography

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Coda

Here's a good quote from Gadamer to conjure with.

The movement of play as such has, as it were, no substrate. It is the game that is played
it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it.

Then he talks about the play of light. "Play is not to be understood as something a person does."
(p.104)

Category

1. Play

Tags

1. computer game
2. engagement
3. Gadamer
4. Huizinga

Date Created

September 10, 2011

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