

Meaning in Play
Curriculum and Instruction 801

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“That which is neither utility nor truth nor likeness, nor yet, in its effects, is harmful, can best be judged by the criterion of the charm this is in it, and by the pleasure it affords. Such pleasure, entailing as it does no appreciable good or ill, is play.” - Plato

Games are interactive experiences. Within a semiotic structure, games present patterns of perceptual stimulation that offer a level of involvement unique unto itself. Using a variety of media, games provide a context within which our minds are free to explore new territory without distraction or interruption. They define an area where we can interact with other individuals, a narrative, or objects, outside of reality. A participant then operates within the rules and structures of the game to produce an experience with meaning and purpose. With these characteristics in mind, this paper will focus its attention toward how games provide meaning through acts of play. How is meaning elicited through play?

Lets begin by focusing our attention toward the questions of what games are and what they do. So, how do we begin playing? Tradition states in my family that at any gather we must play a game of cribbage. Before the cards are dealt, even before anyone begins to shuffle the cards, there is a series of preparative steps that must be gone through, such as; clearing the table, preparing the cribbage board, and gathering people to play. There is a ritualize group of actions that must first be accomplished before the game truly starts. A context must be organized in preparation for the game. We must define a space to play within. I intentionally use the words ritualize here because games

must define a space in which to play in order to be successful. May it be real, virtual or even within the mind of the players, games must define a special area within which the participants can play. This space is much like that of a church or an art museum; it is concerned with preparing for the action that is to come.

Now that we have defined the space surrounding the game, let's briefly discuss the active aspects of game play. Referring back to the game of cribbage, we begin with a deck of cards, a wooden board and several pegs. These objects provide us with the mode for playing the game. Having symbolic power, they are the currency through which the game develops. The cards can be defined as the structure for play.

Directly involved with these objects is the system through which the game is played, the rules. Set in stone, the rules form a pattern of agreement between players concerning how the game is played. If you do A then B happens. Taking an example from the game of soccer, a major rule is that you cannot use your hands to direct the ball. It is within this system that players learn to interact with each other and define the interactive character distinctive to games.

At the beginning of this essay, I used a quote from Plato. In this short paragraph Plato associates play with several ideas, those being its lack of affect and ability for pleasure. While this definition leaves us with an idea of play as a superfluous endeavor, I believe that play has a much more significant purpose in our daily lives. Play is a mode of action. Play is a way of experiencing. If we think about children, play is a way of acting out or doing. Playing doctor is a simulation of the experience connected to their understanding of who and what a doctor is. They are taking these experiences and expanding on them in an environment that is safe and defined by their own rules.

In their book Rules of Play, Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen discuss play from the perspective of game design. “The play of a game is the experiential aspect of a game. Play in a game occurs as the game rules are set into motion and experienced by the players.”ⁱ They go on to define play as “free movement within a more rigid structure.”ⁱⁱ These perspectives of play focuses attention on the player’s ability to manipulate the game structures and systems to their advantage. As an individual, they are asserting their will over the system to achieve their goals and desires. Though the player must be able to accomplish these tasks in relationship to the other players. “Play only happens through participation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Here we are prescribing what the possibilities of play might be. In one instance they are a way of performing or a way of acting out in a context. On the other hand they are a way of actively participating with in a context.

Now lets begin to talk about what ways play becomes meaningful. Raph Koster talks about the effect of games in this way. “Games are very real to me. Games might seem abstract from reality because they are iconic depictions of patterns in the world. They have more in common with how our brain visualizes things than they do with how reality is actually formed. Since our perception of reality is basically abstractions anyway,”^{iv} In Theory of Fun, Koster makes connections between how humans perceive the semiotic patterns inherent in games, the physiological ways the brain interprets this information and how we assert that information back into our environment. He continues by asking the question, “If games are essentially models of reality, then the things that games teach us might reflect on reality?”^v In my opinion, Koster sees meaning in play developing from the player’s ability to make connections between the game and reality.

If we continue to look at meaning in play, we must turn to Jim Gee's method of describing how games provide experiences for learning. "Games situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences to solve problems and reflect on the intricacies of the design of imagined worlds and the design of both real and imagined social relationships and identities in the modern world."^{vi} Gee is making a similar argument to that of Koster here. Meaning is produced through an association that takes place between both real and imagined worlds. Though, Gee believes that experiences in the game must be realized through embodiment. An abstract idea must be realized in a tangible form.

Gee moves further in his debate by making a distinction between an active participant and a critical participant. "Understanding meanings is an active affair in which we have to reflect (however unconsciously) on the situation and the domain we are in. Learning in any semiotic domain crucially involves learning how to situate meanings for that domain in the sorts of situations the domain involves."^{vii} The importance here is that not only do we need to be active in our role to provide meaning, but we must also allow for moments of critical reflect. We must make a connection between our actions and our thoughts in order for the experience to have a significant effect. "Situated cognition is thinking as tied to a body that has experience in the world. This work argues that human learning is not just a matter of what goes on inside people's head, but is fully embedded in (situated within) a material, social, and cultural world."^{viii} To learn is to think on a Meta scale.

Returning back to Zimmerman and Salen, their definition of meaningful play resides in the player's ability to make decisions. "Meaningful play emerges from the

relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome.”^{ix} Again, they are placing the capacity to make meaning in the hands of the player. The player must provide the impetus for making a decision that leads to a specific result. An action is based on the context and the system, which defines an outcome, leading to meaning. “Playing a game means making choices and taking actions. Every action taken results in a change affecting the overall system of the game.”^x

They go a bit further though. “Meaningful play occurs when the relationship between actions and outcome in a game are both discernable and integrated into the larger context of the game.”^{xi} In addition to action and outcome, meaning is produced through the ability to discern differences in choices and integrate the outcomes into the overall context of the game. This is what establishes the possibility of an experience to having purpose. Meaning happens when an individual makes sense of action, taking it in and making it his or her own.

I’d like to finish with a quote from Raph Koster. “Games, at their best, are not prescriptive. They demand that the user create a response given the tools at hand. It is a lot easier to fail to respond to a painting than to fail to respond to a game.”^{xii} In the end all of these tools for having meaning are in the hands of the participant. Our understanding of the game and its context must be such that we can make decisions become meaningful in hindsight. For an experience to have meaning, an active, yet critical role must be followed.

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- ⁱ Rules of Play pg 311
 - ⁱⁱ Rules of Play pg 304
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Rules of Play pg. 327
 - ^{iv} Theory of Fun pg.?
 - ^v Theory of Fun pg. 52
 - ^{vi} Gee pg.48
 - ^{vii} Gee pg. 26
 - ^{viii} Gee pg. 8
 - ^{ix} Rules of Play pg. 34
 - ^x Rules of Play pg.?
 - ^{xi} Rules of Play pg.34
 - ^{xii} Theory of Fun pg 152