Lectio Praecursoria: Jaakko Stenros

Playfulness and play are deeply rooted in our cultures, in the way we socially interact with each other, and even in the biology of our bodies. Playfulness and play are, to us humans, ever-present. Play is older than language. It is older than culture. It is older than humans. Indeed, play is not only human, or even just mammalian. It is an exaggeration to say that if it has a spine, it plays, but the exaggeration is not huge. Play is primal.

In recent years certain formalized patterns of play, namely games, have been particularly visible in public discourse. The prominent role of designed digital game products in economy, society, and culture has drawn increasing public attention to them, and there are numerous initiatives to adopt games and game-like structures outside the traditional domains of games, for purposes such as learning and value creation.

Connected to this rise of the digital game as a cultural artefact is the emergence of an academic field. This field, which has been called 'game studies' and 'ludology' since it started to take shape around the turn of the millennium, is particularly interested in the digital game, but also more generally interested in games and play. A key element in contemporary game studies has been the valuation and evaluation of games and play as themselves, not just in terms of their use, or in light of theories developed for understanding other phenomena. The cultures of players and the meanings of gaming are also important.

Yet, although designed digital game products are trendy now, both in the culture at large and in academia, games have as long a history as the rest of human culture. Even in academia play and games have been studied for a good long while. Interesting and important works can be found from 19th century writings, and from the beginning of the 20th century onwards there has been a more sustained interest, especially in children's play, the play of animals, and the serious and clinical applications of play.

My route to game studies is unorthodox in the sense that I did not come through digital games, but role-playing games. Thus although the idea of unapologetically approaching games *as* games is of utmost importance, the bias towards games that are digital in contemporary game studies and ludology seems unfortunate. I claim that in order to truly understand games and play today in our lives, the gap between contemporary game studies and longer traditions of studying play in psychology, philosophy, ethology, anthropology, and other such fields must be bridged. These partly disconnected research strands need to be brought together. To be able to truly grasp play and games on their own terms, a foundational understanding of playfulness, play, and games is needed; one that covers dogs play-fighting, the parallel play of children, *hide and seek*, *tukkihumala*, *World of Warcraft*, foreplay, trolling, and the thing that brought me to game studies, live action role-playing.

I have constructed a framework for understanding playfulness, play, and games. That is what is at stake here. That is what is in play, and what I have worked towards in my dissertation. The idea of play that I advocate is very broad and promiscuous; the idea being that through inclusiveness, we can open a bigger picture and find more similarities. This is a conscious choice; one that seeks to balance approaches that concentrate narrowly on a specific subset of games or play.

The framework considers both animal play and human play, children's play, and adult play. Play is considered as rooted in biology, but also as socially and culturally constructed. It includes both the idealized aspects of play, meaning play that is liberating, creative, and uplifting, but also the darker side of play, such as play to order, repetitive play, and even the dangerous, transgressive, or illegal bad play. A key move is the separation of playfulness as a mindset and play as an activity. It is possible to be playful, while in a serious context, and possible to be working while participating in playing or gaming. The numerous assigned functions of play, as well as the non-functionality of play, are addressed.

This broad approach does tend to find play under every rock, and that is its strength, not a weakness. It is easier to concentrate on a particular part of the landscape of play once we have a more holistic picture of the terrain.

One place where play can be uncovered is research and academic work. The lectio precursoria, the format of the talk I am now giving, is designed to explain the contents of a dissertation to a lay audience and to contextualize the work under scrutiny. This is a challenge to an academic. Stripping away specific terminology, shorthand jargon, and metonymic namedropping leaves the academic naked. Even when trying to do so, errant words like 'metonymic' tend to slip in. The challenge can of course be approached in a playful mindset. Let us make an extreme version of lectio. On the internet there is a text editor, The Up-Goer Five Editor, which only allows one to use the 1000 most common words in the English language. With this editor, I have written an explanation of the main thrust of argumentation in this dissertation:

> Humans and animals play and they have always played. The push to play is in us all; it is in our bodies.
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> This push to play comes from a state of mind, a play-mind. We are in play-mind when we do things because we want to do the things, and not because we want what doing the thing causes. When we do things because we want what is caused, that is not play. That is work. Play-mind is a mind-body thing.
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> When we do things while we have play-mind, we play. This is something we do together with each other, and we are good at knowing when we, or other humans, or even animals, play. We look at play and we know it. Yet humans can also pretend to have play-mind while they play even if they have work-mind. Like when old humans play with children. Play grows out of play-mind, but it can live on without it. Some play is nice, some is bad for the people playing, but it is all play. Play is not so much a brain thing as a together with others thing.
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> When play takes the same forms many times and it becomes known, it further grows different from play-mind. It becomes something all people in a large place know. When there are set ways, it becomes a game. Games can be something that are taken part in with a play-mind, but they can also be taken part in while in a work-mind. Many work in games. Many are also in play-mind when they are working, and sometimes this bothers work-mind people. Game is a set form thing of a lot of people.

The explanation could go on, but it would get increasingly clunky as concepts, our analytic tools, would be constructed by stringing common words together. But what does this exercise give us? As mentioned, the lectio preacursoria is supposed to explain parts of the dissertation to a lay audience. By adopting that limitation, and stretching it, I am playing. It is common in games to use limitations, or to attempt to do things with insufficient means. Instead of doing the efficient thing, I am adding arbitrary obstacles. Writing the text becomes more playful for me, and perhaps more fun for the listener.

I am also playing with the academic conception of the broad public as unable to grasp complex issues – and the corresponding common idea of academia as elitist. By taking to an extreme the idea that academic slang cannot be used, I create a text that is again difficult to follow since the words used lack precision – which is obviously contrary to the goal of the lectio.

This play may even amount to a joke, but that is difficult to predict at the time of writing this speech, since the existence of a joke as a joke is tied to a context. Yet this speech, now, here, is not playful, even if parts of its creation were.

Of course, on a meta level the Up-Goer Five passage is playing about play. The dissertation is about play and I am exploring it with a playful mind. When I originally had the idea to see if I could express key ideas without specific terminology, I did not have a goal beyond the action itself. After that, I started seeing how the resulting text might be used for numerous goals. And then I started, playfully, to try and come up with more and more ways to tie this text to the theme I am developing. There is a continuous reversal, a flip-flopping, between the playful mindset and the goal-oriented mindset.

Now this playing is also put into work as an example of how a playful mindset can be applied in a serious context. Lectio praecursoria is part of a serious, even stressful situation. Approaching it in a playful mindset can be seen as an incongruence, similar to working as a player or a gamer. Yet this is also a ritual, and a performance, and play does have an element in those. There is a system here, procedures, rules and traditions – all of them social constructions of course, but nonetheless real. Currently I am playing within their boundaries, but it would also be possible to not only draw attention to the structure, but to start playing with the rules, and with the system. This might be subversive or creative. It might even amount to grief play, as such moves also have a place within the system; however, they are usually reserved for the opponent.

Now, if this kind of play would start to surface in other game studies defenses, the play would start to become more formalized. Over time it could become a sort of an unofficial defense game – or just become part of the ritual.

All these different aspects of playfulness, play, and games need to be taken into account. What a player does with a format, be it a doctoral candidate at a defense or a gamer with a digital game product, is something a theory of play should be able to cover: the consciously designed and the socially evolved, the by-the-book and the subversive, the joyous and the functional, the spontaneous and the institutionalized.

A frank exploration of the multitude of play is needed, if we want to truly understand play. Such an understanding of play would resonate not just in games, but in toys, playgrounds, puzzles, sports, and simulations. Nor should we forget rituals, fictions, competitions, and performances either. Indeed, a thorough understanding of play can benefit our understanding of creativity, innovation, beauty, and even purpose.

Yet just as play is valuable in and of itself, the understanding of play should not need be driven by its applications and assigned functions. We should strive to understand play for its own sake.

Stenros, Jaakko. 2015. "Playfulness, Play, and Games: A Constructionist Ludology Approach." Tampereen ylipisto. http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-44-9788-9.