

5

Getting Serious About Play

Today's adult must possess the skill for play in order to perform meaningful interactions with the technology of everyday life—making a withdrawal from an ATM, initiating an e-mail message, making a cell phone call. In this sense, we play every day, unbeknownst to us.

How the Information Age Relies on Play

The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect, but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. —Carl Jung

To create a compelling experience with products and technology, we must look at a new conceptual model—one that places play behavior at the core of the creation of experiences and products. Indeed, two books—*Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga’s 1938 study of play among Europeans, and anthropologist Roger Caillois’s *Man, Play and Games*—describe as *play* our precise interactions with ATMs, email, and cell phones.

By designing with play behavior and interactivity as the experience providers, we create the benefit of the best toys: They are fun, engaging, challenging, rewarding, nonfrustrating, and the value of the experience is both repeatable and cumulative. Play should not be seen here as a trivial activity, performed by hands and objects, but as a highly spiritual activity dependent on imagination and creativity more than on any play artifact. The artifact for play is the human brain.

Hands do not initiate play; the mind must do it first.

Deconstructing the experience of almost any interaction with most technologies demonstrates the connection to play behavior. The strong elements of play involved in many of our voluntary daily activities—voicemail, instant messaging, warming food in the microwave—paved the way for their quick acceptance. And once these kinds of activities become play, they must keep challenging the user, maintaining their interest in the possibility of the next experience.

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The slow acceptance of the ATM (or the personal computer) in the early 1980s was partly due to the adult’s inability to engage in play. A child would have recognized immediately the “benefit” of the activity, and the play character and play pattern of the device. When something loses its play nature, it becomes a chore. And a chore does not entice the user to engage in the activity. The device needed is what I call a ToolToy.

Tools, Toys, and ToolToys

I coined the term *ToolToy* in 1989 to emphasize the importance of consciously reexamining the process of product and experience in the context of an improved conceptual and behavioral model in which play, and the values it represents, have a pivotal role. The basic passage of any artifact from tool to toy must be placed in the context of the famous Theory of Human Motivation put forth by educational psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943. His theory proposes that humans must satisfy a series of needs in order to achieve healthy and fulfilled lives. Beginning with basic physiological and safety needs, the hierarchy then extends to latent needs such as love/belonging, esteem/status, and self-actualization.

TOOLTOY

a product that satisfies the requirements for a functional tool and gives the user the pleasures associated with toys.

If objects had conscious phases of existence, like humans, they would likely move from basic physiological needs toward self-actualization—*toward becoming that for which they were intended*, but on a different and higher plateau. For example, a living room chair must be well made, of reliable materials, and kept out of the elements to fulfill its physiological and safety needs. It must be ergonomic and aesthetically pleasing in the living room context (fitting in visually with other furniture) to fulfill its love and esteem needs. And it must bring a pleasurable experience to the user to become self-actualized as a chair—fulfilling the purpose for which it was intended.

**"We act on tools with our hands, and on toys with our imagination.
The whole being needs both as a condition of self-actualization."**

While referencing Maslow, I must point out that I do not subscribe to his placing of needs in a hierarchy, with some necessarily seen as more important than others. For the fully functioning human being, needs are rarely hierarchical but rather synchronic and dynamic. They relate to each other and are equally important to the human spirit. And so it is with tools and toys: We act on tools with our hands, and on toys with our imagination. The whole being needs both as a condition of self-actualization.

The historic passage of any tool involves the creation of its primordial, purposeful, and functional shape first, and then the addition of elements unrelated that function. Some of these elements are decorative, as in surface treatments or engraving, while others identify the tool by the individual user or owner, such as crests or trademarks. The passage from tool to toy—and particularly the passage from tool to ToolToy—involves adding to its function and image a third element: *behavior*.

Toys are a perfect example of behavioral artifacts. By themselves, they mean and do nothing. They are designed for “relationships” or for the “experience of,” and not simply for the aesthetics of form or practical functions. The functionality of a toy resides in its potential for creating a relationship, either between it and the user, or among users. It is here that we can find a new product development brief that takes into consideration the relevance of play behavior and its continuation in adulthood, in the context of all cultures, and with specific regard to the creation of artifacts and environments.

When we intentionally start adding elements of manner and relationship—behavioral play characteristics—to any object or system that contains elements of purpose (that is, any object that must help human beings to do things), we are transforming a tool into a ToolToy: Swatch watches, Nike shoes, Apple Macintosh’s OS X operating system, Smart cars, and the like. Tools are designed for what we do with them; ToolToys determine the way we do it—our physical technique as well as our imagination. *The ToolToy is the aesthetic of the possible.*

Just Playing Around

There are children playing in the streets who could solve some of my top problems in physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago.
—J. Robert Oppenheimer, nuclear physicist

Our search for a new ecology of imagination, creativity, and innovation starts by reclaiming play as an ageless and indispensable condition of every human being, as well as the indispensable condition for the choreography of interaction between user and object. This journey allows the creation of a way of life in which every product, every service, and every system becomes a festival. To quote play theorist Robert E. Neale, “What happens to the child in play can happen to the adult, and when it does, paradise is present.”

Individual play is as essential to the imaginative adult as it is to the development of the child. Tim Berners-Lee has stated that he was “just playing” on his new NeXT computer and exploring the possibilities of hypertext when he invented the World Wide Web. His ability to play generated one of the most significant tools to shape human experience.

It is in play that we have made our greatest discoveries.

His experience is not unique—countless inventions and innovations have been realized by venturing into the unknown, playing with an idea or process to see what might happen. When DuPont chemist Stephanie Kwolek poured a particular polymer in 1965, she noticed something intriguing: The consistency and color were very different from what she expected. Her curiosity and willingness to play led to the development of Kevlar, one of the strongest and lightest fibers ever invented, used in a variety of products from brake linings to bulletproof jackets. As she later commented, “All sorts of things can happen when you’re open to new ideas and playing around with things.”

The ecology of play allows and encourages us to maintain childlike traits, chase silly questions, get excited, and dream of impossible goals, while forgetting all the metrics that rule life outside this space. Here we can develop our potentiality as tricksters, creating narratives however we see fit. The ecology of play is the ecology of possibility, which incubates creativity. And creativity starts by creating an image of possibility.

Playing the Game

The essential feature of play is that during true playfulness the solution of a problem is not imperative.

—Franz Alexander, *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, April 1958

By having no measurable value of usefulness or practicality, the activities of the Temporary Play Space (TPS) allow people to practice and perfect mental abilities that might not receive exposure otherwise. These activities also allow them to develop and master play behaviors with other people, or with new tools, objects, and ideas. This builds off a play pattern that we use in our daily interactions with others—our social games with defined rules and context-specific codes. For example, the way we relate to business associates or go out on a date follows a general game structure, and we find play in the contextual details.

The play element has long been part of business competition—specifically, the competitive aspects of play that focus on setting records and proving one’s superiority or merit. These aspects are at the core of the “*need to play*,” a need as pronounced in adults as it is in children.

“There is a game side to almost every commercial effort or technological achievement: Business is play. And the most successful players of this game are those who can also imagine the opposite: Play is business.”

The desire to challenge, to be the best at something in a demonstrable way—establishing a record or overcoming an obstacle, for instance—emphasizes the *play* and *game* elements in economical and social life. President Kennedy’s desire to send a man to the moon inspired the nation to play with the challenge of his dream—to actively explore the “impossible.” There is a game side to almost every commercial effort or technological achievement: Business is play. And the most successful players of this game are those who can imagine the opposite: Play is business. For them, play means knowledge and mastery of the present in order to deal with the future.

I am not suggesting that every organization should have a free-for-all work ecology. But when involved in creating new products and services—in that moment or in that month—the process must include a phase in which there are no benchmarks or metrics, and individuals are allowed to play within the boundaries of what play is all about. To play with their own ideas and create a space for “*What if...?*”

Play behavior might not be the best behavior range for everyone in the corporation, but the option must be present somewhere within the business. For a period of time, people need to have the freedom of uncertainty: *I cannot define what I will produce.*

The Conditions for Possibility

Flexibility of mind, inventiveness, improvisational skills, ambition, intuition, and focus are some of the qualities shared by people who are effective facilitators of change. These qualities are encouraged through an engagement in play activities and by the freedoms promoted by play: freedom from expected utilitarian results and repression. Every play activity we engage in is a one-of-a-kind laboratory for our instincts, insights, and intuition. And the creation of this space cultivates the ecology of possibility.

We create the freedom to work the way we need to, on whatever we desire. It is a space *separate* from the constraints of our “regular” lives, where we set our own time and direction in the serious exploration of possibility. Our path is uncertain —there are no immediate metrics or benchmarks that can tell what it means.

Play is *unproductive* in the traditional sense of the word, as we expect no direct benefit or gain. It is governed by its own rules, meaning that we define for ourselves the actions and outcomes we will accept in this realm, in this moment, and for this time. We initiate it on our own, using our trickster capability to suspend the rules of real life and address the possibilities of our imagination. æ

