

Chapter 3: Meaningful Play

Overview



We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. They pretend to get terribly angry. And-what is most important-in all these doings they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment. Such romplings of young dogs are only one of the simpler forms of animal play. There are other, much more highly developed forms: regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public.

Here we have at once a very important point: even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function-that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. (Johann Huizinga, Homo Ludens)

Introducing Meaningful Play

Johann Huizinga is one of the greatest scholars of play in the twentieth century. His groundbreaking book, *Homo Ludens*, is a unique investigation of the role of play in human civilization. The title is a play on *Homo Sapiens*, and translates as *Man the Player*. According to Huizinga, play and games, which have been maligned in recent history as trivial and frivolous, are in fact at the very center of what makes us human. "Play is older than culture," as Huizinga puts it, and *Homo Ludens* is a celebration of play that links the visceral, combative nature of contest directly to war, poetry, art, religion, and other essential elements of culture. *Homo Ludens* is, in many ways, an attempt to redefine and elevate the significance of play.

Huizinga's vision of play offers a perfect point of departure for the development of the concept of meaningful play. We begin with a close reading of one section of the opening passage from *Homo Ludens*:

It [play] is a significant function-that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.^[1]

Huizinga emphasizes the fact that all play means something, that there is "sense" to play, that it transcends. The idea that "all play means something" is a wonderfully complex statement we can interpret in a variety of ways. In fact, all of the following are possible readings of the text: These are complex and multi-layered questions, lacking definitive answers. In some sense, each of the interpretations posed are implied in Huizinga's statement, and all of them point to key aspects of play and play's participation in the creation of meaning. These important questions, and their possible answers, contain all of the main themes of this book. We will, in the pages that follow, investigate the intricate relationships among game design, play, and meaning.

- Huizinga says that play is a *significant function*. Does this mean that play is an important (and possibly unrecognized) force in culture-that it is significant in the way that art and literature are? Or does he mean that play *signifies* - that it is a symbolic act of communication?
- He mentions that there is *some sense* to play. Does he mean that play isn't solely chaotic, but is instead an event that can be understood and analyzed if one looks closely enough? Or is he implying that sense itself (the opposite of nonsense) is something intrinsically related to play?
- There's the complex statement: *In play there is something "at play."* Does Huizinga mean that there is always something deeper "at play," which constitutes any instance of play we observe in the real world? Or that in play something is always in motion, never fixed, and in a constant state of transformation?
- This "at play" quality of play *transcends the immediate needs of life*. Does the word "transcend" imply something spiritual? Or does Huizinga simply mean that play creates an artificial space beyond that of ordinary life?
- The same "at play" characteristic of play *imparts meaning to the action*. Does the fact that play is always "at play" relate to the meaning of the action? Or does it imply that play must be understood as one element of a more general system out of which meaning grows?
- The passage concludes with the sentence, *All play means something*. But what does play mean? To who or what is it meaningful? What is the process by which meaning emerges from play?

^[1]Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 446.

Meaning and Play

Meaning, meaning, meaning. If you repeat the word enough, you can almost coax it into the realm of pure non-sense. Because asking about the meaning of meaning can quickly turn into a jumbled, meaningless mess, let's frame the connection between play and meaning as simply as we can. In the game of Pong, for example, the meaning of the interaction between player and game is mediated by play, from the play of pixels representing the ball, to the play of the mechanical knobs controlling the digital paddles, to the competitive social force of play between opponents. It is for these reasons, and many others, that game designers should care about the relationship between meaning and play.

Learning to create great game experiences for players-experiences that have meaning and are meaningful-is one of the goals of successful game design, perhaps the most important one. We call this goal the design of *meaningful play*, the core concept of our approach. This concept is so critical to the rest of this chapter that we

are going to repeat ourselves: *the goal of successful game design is the creation of meaningful play.*

Meaningful play is that concept which can address all of the "unanswerable" questions raised by Huizinga. It is also a concept that raises questions of its own, challenging assumptions we might have about the role of design in shaping play.

One of the difficulties in identifying meaningful play in games is the near-infinite variety of forms that play can take. Here are some examples:

- the intellectual dueling of two players in a well-met game of Chess
- the improvisational, team-based balletics of Basketball
- the dynamic shifting of individual and communal identities in the online role-playing game EverQuest
- the lifestyle-invading game Assassin, played on a college campus

What do all of these examples have in common? Each situates play within the context of a game. Play doesn't just come from the game itself, but from the way that players interact with the game in order to play it. In other words, the board, the pieces, and even the rules of Chess can't alone constitute meaningful play. Meaningful play emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played. Understanding this interaction helps us to see just what is going on when a game is played. One way of framing what players do when they play a game is to say that they are making choices. They are deciding how to move their pieces, how to move their bodies, what cards to play, what options to select, what strategies to take, how to interact with other players. They even have to make the choice whether or not to play!

When a player makes a choice within a game, the action that results from the choice has an outcome. In Chess, if a player moves a piece on the board, this action affects the relationships of all of the other pieces: one piece might be captured, or a king might suddenly find itself in check. In Assassin, if a player stealthily stalks her target and manages to shoot him with a dart gun, the overall game changes as a result of this action: a hit is scored, the victim is out for the rest of the game, and he must give *his* target name to the player that just shot him. In EverQuest, if you engage with and kill a monster, the stats and equipment of your character can change; the larger game-world is affected as well, even if it simply means that for the moment there is one less monster.

Playing a game means making choices and taking actions. All of this activity occurs within a game-system designed to support meaningful kinds of choice-making. Every action taken results in a change affecting the overall system of the game. Another way of stating this point is that an action a player takes in a game results in the creation of new meanings within the system. For example, after you move a piece in Chess, the newly established relationships between Chess pieces gives rise to a new set of meanings-meanings created by the player's action.