Play Matters

Miguel Sicart

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Contents

On Thinking Playfully

Many people (we series editors included) find video games exhilarating, but it can be just as interesting to ponder why that is so. What do video games do? What can they be used for? How do they work? How do they relate to the rest of the world? Why is play both so important and so powerful?

Playful Thinking is a series of short, readable, and argumentative books that share some playfulness and excitement with the games that they are about. Each book in the series is small enough to fit in a backpack or coat pocket, and combines depth with readability for any reader interested in playing more thoughtfully or thinking more playfully. This includes, but is by no means limited to, academics, game makers, and curious players.

So, we are casting our net wide. Each book in our series provides a blend of new insights and interesting arguments with overviews of knowledge from game studies and other areas. You will see this reflected not just in the range of titles in our series, but in the range of authors creating them. Our basic assumption is simple: video games are such a flourishing medium that any new perspective on them is likely to show us something unseen or forgotten, including those from such unconventional voices

as artists, philosophers, or specialists in other industries or fields of study. These books are bridge builders, cross-pollinating both areas with new knowledge and new ways of thinking.

At its heart, this is what Playful Thinking is all about: new ways of thinking about games and new ways of using games to think about the rest of the world.

Jesper Juul
Geoffrey Long
William Uricchio

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Finally, Ane provides help, support, and a smile when I most need it.

This book is for Carlos and Silas, makers of chaos and order in play.

Instructions for Reading This Book

Look at the number of notes in this book.

There are *hundreds* of them. (Yes, you read right.) But don't despair. You can read *Play Matters* without reading any of the notes. They will be there, waiting for you—perhaps even haunting you. But you do not need to read them.

If you want to know more about play and why it matters, go ahead and read the text. Ignore the notes until you find an idea that provokes you or puzzles you or is a concept you want to know more about. The notes are there to expand the book and give you other ideas, other perspectives, other challenges.

The notes are an extension of the book, and so is the book's website, playmatters.cc. Use them to explore beyond the bounds of this book why play matters.

1 Play Is

Think about play, and what it means to you.

What comes to mind? A pastime? Games? Childhood activities? The opposite of work? A source for learning? What you'd rather be doing now?

Think again: How much do you know about play?

Let's start with a simple exercise. List your daily activities, the tasks that structure your day, from work to leisure to those things you have to do that are neither, yet you *have to* do them.

How do you do these tasks? If you are happy and well rested, you may approach your day in a playful way, enjoying what you do. Happiness may give you time to play, to live in a different way. The temptation of enjoying and living life through play, of having fun, is always present.

To play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human.

We live in exciting times. You might have encountered the argument that games are now everywhere[1]; that intellectuals, artists, policymakers, and institutions are games for serious and trivial purposes. You might have also read that games will be "the dominant cultural form of the XXI Century."[2] There is even

talk among game developers of the twenty-first century being "the ludic [as in, play-centric] century."[3]

I disagree, to a certain extent. Games don't matter. Like in the old fable, we are the fools looking at the finger when someone points at the moon. Games are the finger; play is the moon.

What is true is that play is a dominant way of expression in our First World societies. We play games, but also *with* toys, *on* playgrounds, *with* technologies and design. And play is not just the ludic, harmless, encapsulated, and positive activity that philosophers have described.[4] Like any other form of being, play can be dangerous; it can be hurting, damaging, antisocial, corrupting. Play is a manifestation of humanity, used for expressing and being in the world.

To understand what play is, I propose here a portable theory, or rhetoric, of play. Instead of deriving an understanding of play from a particular object or activity, like war, ritual, or games, I see play as a portable tool for being. It is not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life.

Why propose a theory of play now? In our culture, *playful* has become a positive word. The author of the 2011 biography of Steve Jobs uses *playful* as a word of praise for the design of Apple computers, originally conceived to contrast with dull corporate machines.[5] Apple's "playful" design appropriated cues from an understanding of play as a personal expression: beauty, counter-cultural politics, and moral values. That is the value and place of play in our culture.

Despite its importance, we are still trying to understand play with models inherited from the past. Our theories are mostly derived from the work of Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, who famously coined the concept of Homo Ludens.[6] This

book is not written in the tradition of Huizingan play, under-
stood as a fair contest that creates a separate world with rules
that are never questioned. The nature of play I am advocating
for here is different from that of Huizinga.

I am not going to oppose play to reality, to work, to ritual or
sports because it exists in all of them. It is a way of being in the
world, like languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth.[7]

And play is not necessarily fun. It is pleasurable, but the plea-
sures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happi-
ness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts,
offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not
playing. Let's not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, open-
ing us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world.

Play can be dangerous too:[8] it can be addicting and destructive
and may lead to different types of harm—physical injuries, lost
friendships, emotional breakdowns. Play is a dance between cre-
ation and destruction, between creativity and nihilism. Playing is
a fragile, tense activity, prone to breakdowns. Individual play is a
challenge to oneself, to keep on playing. Collective play is a bal-
ancing act of egos and interests, of purposes and intentions. Play
is always on the verge of destruction, of itself and of its players,
and that is precisely why it matters. Play is a movement between
order and chaos.[9] Like tragedy, it fulfills its expressive purpose
when it manages a fragile, oscillating balance between both.
This echoes the concept of dark play,[10] exploring the boundaries
between play and not play, between performance and secrecy.[11]
Dark play, with its potential dangers and exhilarating results, is
another example of the nature of play as a way of being in the
world—a dangerous one.

Play is carnivalesque too.[12] Play appropriates events, struc-
tures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them, or

make them deadly serious. The carnival of the Middle Ages, with its capacity to subvert conventions and institutions in a suspension of time and power,[13] was a symptom of freedom.[14] Carnivalesque play takes control of the world and gives it to the players for them to explore, challenge, or subvert. It exists; it is part of the world it turns upside down. Through carnivalesque play, we express ourselves, taking over the world to laugh at it and make sense of it too.

Think about the famous Twitter bot-not-bot *horse_ebooks*.[15] Initially a spam bot, then a piece of automatic found art, and finally a piece of performance art, *Horse_ebooks* is the perfect example of carnivalesque—dangerous play and playfulness in this age of computing machinery. By taking over a social situation and technology, this (not)-bot-come-art piece played with our expectations, broke our hearts, and showed us a new way of seeing the world and understanding ourselves. *Horse_ebooks* was appropriated by a performance artist to explore new horizons by impersonating a twitter bot in Marina Abramovic-inspired durational arts. By faking being a bot, the artist Jacob Bakkila teased our perception of Twitter and the technologies to which we relinquish our entertainment. The sense of betrayal that some felt when *Horse_ebooks* was revealed to be human can be understood only as an example of carnivalesque dark play and the ways in which it can painfully enrich our lives.

This is also not a theory of play *through* games. Games don't matter that much. They are a manifestation, a form of and for play, just not the only one. They are the strongest form, culturally and economically dominant. But they are part of an ecology of playthings and play contexts, from toys to playgrounds, from political action to aesthetic performance, through which play is used for expression. This book explores this ecology, from

conventional computer and board games to sports, activism, critical engineering, interaction design, toys, and playgrounds. Play is the force that ties these cultural expressions together and makes them matter.

I am aware of both my ambition and the obvious limitations of what I can do. Mine is a romantic theory (or rhetoric) of play, based on an idea of creativity and expression that has been developed in the highly postromantic cultural environment of the early twenty-first century[16]. I write this theory of play as a reaction to the instrumentalized, mechanistic thinking on play championed by postmodern culture industries. This is a theory that acts as a call to playful arms, an invocation of play as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism.[17]

If and when this era passes, my theory will be rendered obsolete. But right now, we need to think about play matters and reclaim play as a way of expression, a way of engaging with the world—not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production. Like literature, art, song, and dance; like politics and love and math, play is a way of engaging and expressing our being in the world.

In fact, play is a fundamental part of our moral well-being, of the healthy and mature and complete human life. Through play we experience the world, we construct it and we destroy it, and we explore who we are and what we can say. Play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance.

We need play precisely because we need occasional freedom and distance from our conventional understanding of the moral fabric of society. Play is important because we need to see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits.

We play because we are human, and we need to understand what makes us human,[18] not in an evolutionary or cognitive way but in a humanistic way. Play is the force that pulls us together. It is a way of explaining the world, others, and ourselves. Play is expressing ourselves—who we want to be, or who we don't want to be. Play is what we do when we are human.

………………………

So what *is* play?

For a long time, my day has been structured around play. Lego bricks and toy cars precede my breakfast, as *Drop7* and *SpellTower* lull me to sleep; *Noby Noby Boy* helps me wait by the printer, and *Desert Bus* accompanies me in academic meetings. My life takes place in the time between play. This is perhaps the reason I believe that play articulates time—that a day, a week, a month, and a year are just arbitrary segments that we use to keep track of the times we play.

Let me foolishly try to define what play is.[19] Play, like any other human activity, is highly resistant to formalized understanding. Since I will fail too in trying to define it, I want to do so with a minimal definition of play, aware of its own fragile connection with a present time.[20] Let's start, then, by understanding what play is.

Play is contextual.[21] In a colloquial understanding of play, that context of play is the formally bound space determined by the rules and the community of play. But context is more complicated; it's a messier network of people, rules, negotiations, locations, and objects. Play happens in a tangled world of people, things, spaces, and cultures.

An obvious example is provided by sports. The laws of soccer determine the space in which the game should be officially played: a "natural or artificial" surface, "according to the rules of

the competition" (law 1). But if we are to understand semipro-fessional soccer, the context should also include the stadium or training grounds open to spectators, as well as the location of the grounds in the larger urban space. It is not the same to play pickup games of soccer in poor neighborhoods as it is in more affluent ones: the materiality of the game changes, and so do the interpretations of the rules and even the play styles.[22]

Context comprises the environment in which we play, the technologies with which we play, and the potential companions of play.[23] Context is the network of things, people, and places needed for play to take place. A playground is a pure play con-text: a separated space devoid of any other functionality than being a context for playing. But it's also true that almost any space can become a playground.

How do we know that a particular context is a context for play? Often there are cues embedded in objects that signal that a space, thing, or collective are there to play. Masks and disguises, merry-go-rounds, and computer controllers all point to the idea that play is possible in that context. Players interpret spaces and situations as potentially open to play when they perceive those cues.[24]

Artificially created objects or situations, then, can signal play. Play happens mostly in contexts designed for that activity.[25] It is important to understand that play, unlike other forms of expres-sion, can be designed.[26] It is not designed exclusively in the Bau-haus-inspired tradition of a creator who shapes an object for a function,[27] but in a weaker sense: designed as mediated by things created to facilitate the emergence of play.

This is why play and computers get along so well. As univer-sal machines, computers need to have instructions designed for them so they can execute an activity. Similarly, play requires a

certain element of design, material or contextual or both, so we know we can play, or we can be playful. This is why play thrives in the age of computing machinery.

A way of understanding how these contexts are designed is to think about rules. From the strictly observed rules of professional sports to the fluid and unstable rules of children's games, play and rules go together.[28] Rules are the formal instruments that allow the creation and shared identification of a context of play. All contexts of play have rules of some type.

Much has been written on the nature of rules, and it is not my intention here to explain or debate what rules are. Play is derived, mediated, and situated by the use of rules. A rule determines where we play, when we stop playing, and when we can reenter the play context. A rule is written on a piece of paper or in several lines of code, upheld by a referee or a piece of circuitry or a group of friends, or even history and spaces, like house rules.

Rules are facilitators that create a context of play, frames within which play takes place.[29] However, rules are only one element of the context of play, and not the most important. They are necessary but not sufficient for play to exist: players and a certain will to play are needed to engage in play.[30] More important, rules are not sacred.[31] They are nodes in the complex network of the context of play, servants to the action of playing. Rules are another prop that can be targeted by the transformative capacities of play.[32]

Traditionally rules have been seen as the only immutable element of play. If rules were broken, play would finish and whoever broke the rules would be morally guilty.[33] More modern takes on play see the rules as more flexible and interpretive.[34] Discussing and interpreting rules is a crucial part of the play activity. This negotiation consolidates the context of play. A key ingredient of

playing is thinking, manipulating, changing, and adapting rules. Rules, servant to the context, evolve while we play to address the necessities of particular play situations.

Play is also an activity in tension between creation and destruction.[35] Play is always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both. Play is between the rational pleasures of order and creation and the sweeping euphoria of destruction and rebirth, between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac.[36]

For Nietzsche, tragedy summed up two colliding tensions in Greek culture: the culture of order and the culture of drunken disorder, the art of sculpture and the art of music. While artists moved between both, the genre of the Greek tragedy effectively merged both. The order and sobriety of the Apollonian was tensely opposed by the embodied, passionate, irrational, and irreverent Dionysiac art.[37]

The Apollonian and Dionysiac tendencies explain how players navigate the context of play. When playing, we struggle to make sense of the world by constructing our actions within a context. That struggle is not only with the obstacles and needs that play imposes on us, but also with the permanent temptations that happen in play: the temptation of breaking the context, breaking the rules, corrupting play, or, on the opposite side, letting go of all the elements of rationality and structure and letting ourselves loose in the intoxicating pleasures of play.

Lego provides an example of this tension. When building something without following any plans or instructions, I sometimes feel the temptation to build the tallest possible structure, just to see it fall. I pile pieces on top of pieces, in precarious balance, just to reach the highest possible point. I then look at my oeuvre and push it. The pleasure of the wasted time, of the pieces

scattering as they hit the floor, is the pleasure of destructive play—the Dionysiac ending to my Apollonian world building.

Play is this struggle between order and chaos, between the will to create and the will to destroy.[38] Play as an affirmation of humanity occurs because we have to strive to balance it—to tie our demons and make them coexist with our passion for order[39] without falling in the mindless focus that lures us toward structured play.[40] We play by taking only moderately seriously the Apollonian structures of the game and not letting the intoxicating destruction deprive us of the virtues of submitting to order.

How do we keep the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac in order? How does play manage to explore and express without spiraling into its own destruction? In classic theories of play, the answer would be that playing is a pretense, requiring a particular attitude decoupled from reality, so it would always be possible for participants to disengage with the activity.[41] But play is not detached from the world; it lives and thrives *in* the world. So how do we play between excessive order and compulsive destruction?

Play manages that balance because it is a carnivalesque activity.[42] The carnival, as Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin described it, is an outcome of the expressive capacity of play,[43] managing the careful relations between creation and destruction.[44] Bakhtin's carnival is more than the time in which the power institutions of the Middle Ages allow the common people to express themselves through satire and humor.[45] The carnival foreshadows modernity—the rise of a critical, self-aware individual, a body with a mind not subject to institutions determined from another world, but from rationality itself.[46]

Carnival lets laughter, not fun, happen. By temporarily dismissing the oppressive forces of the establishment, laughter

takes over and allows for a bodily form of knowledge that creates truth, and it's free. Laughter requires freedom, an opening from the institutional world, but it also creates freedom. Modernity could be a consequence of laughter, of the possibility of expression afforded in the carnival.[47] Laughter, critical and hurting and enjoyable and deeply embodied, makes carnivals matter.

Laughter and the carnival give us an instrument against seriousness, restoring the "ambivalent wholeness" that is opposite the institutions we live in.[48] Games are an example of carnivalesque behavior that leads to a festive liberation in search from freedom, expression, and truth.[49] Some games, like *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, with its rowdy, physical performativity, or even the early *Grand Theft Auto* titles and its fascinating renderings of possible worlds, point to the importance of carnivalesque laughter in the construction and experience of play.[50] Again, the result is not fun but laughter—pleasurable but risky, and potentially harmful.

Play is carnivalesque. It finds equilibrium between creation and destruction in the embodied laughter. It also presents a number of characteristics that embody this carnivalesque tensions.

Play is appropriative, in that it takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by such context.

From the context of use of a toy to a game, from a ritual to a playground, context becomes servant to the activity of playing.[51] Two physical games can serve as example: the game Ninja is often played in public spaces, from parking lots to the common areas of schools and dorms (figure 1.1).[52] The rules of Ninja are simple: players make a circle, staying at arm's length from each other. At the count of three, players make a ninja pose, palms extended. The goal of the game is to hit any other players' open palms, and only the palms. If you're hit, you have to leave the game. The game continues until only one player is left. The

catch? It's a turn-based game, and only one swift move of attack and defense is allowed—no stopping, no flurry of gestures, just one move to attack or to defend in each turn. Ninja makes players take over a location, forming a circle that soon loses its form and spreads around the space, effectively conquering it. But Ninja also appropriates the space in a sociocultural way: what used to be a parking lot becomes a battlefield, reclaiming the ground for pleasure. And in the public space of a school or a workplace, Ninja can reclaim the importance of laughter to survive the long days of work and obligations. Ninja appropriates the spaces it takes place by means of its sprawling nature.

A more aesthetically oriented approach is provided by *Johan Sebastian Joust*,[53] also a physical game, in this case augmented through the use of technology: *Joust* is a nongraphics video game in which players hold a Playstation Move controller in their hands. The players' movements are determined by the tempo of music: if it is played at a high tempo, players can move quickly, and if it is played at a slow tempo, only careful movement is allowed. To win *Joust*, players need to shake any other players' controllers so much that they are eliminated. The intensity of the shaking is measured by the controllers' accelerometers and related to the tempo of the music, with the results calculated by the computer.

Joust does not appropriate the context by the sheer number of players but by a careful weaving of different aesthetic cues. The PlayStation Move controller that players wield has a glowing LED that gives players information about the state of the game.

Figure 1.1
Ninja takes over IT University. (Photo by Flickr user Joao Ramos. CC-By-NC 2.0. http://www.flickr.com/photos/joaoramos/5621465814/sizes/o/.)

Joust is also a music game, so it has to be heard, not just seen. And the game performs like a dance. Seeing *Joust* being played is like witnessing an impromptu dance with magical candlelight, reinterpreting mundane locations of play into performance spaces, mesmerizing players and spectators in a choreography of moving lights and playful exhilaration (figure 1.2).[54]

The play object, be it a game or a toy, is just a prop for play. Regardless of all the intentions and meanings embedded in the design of play objects, play will always force us to contextualize the meaning of the things involved in playing. Play appropriates the objects it uses to come into existence.[55]

Play is disruptive as a consequence of being appropriate. When it takes over the context in which play take place, it breaks the state of affairs. This is often done for the sake of laughter, for

Figure 1.2
JS Joust serious duelers. (Photo by Bennett Foddy. http://www.foddy .net.)

enjoyment, for passing pleasures. But like all other passing pleasures, play can also disruptively reveal our conventions, assumptions, biases, and dislikes. In disrupting the normal state of affairs by being playful, we can go beyond fun when we appropriate a context with the intention of playing with and within it. And in that move, we reveal the inner workings of the context that we inhabit.

An interesting example of the potential disruptiveness of play is the activist performance Camover.[56] In Camover, players are encouraged to destroy CCTV cameras in a specific urban environment and are awarded points for doing so—the points are made available and visible on a website. This political (and illegal) action uses gamelike elements, such as points or the creation of a shared play community that evaluates the players' performance, to communicate a political message. Camover disrupts the urban context through violent and dangerous play, engaging with the political situation in the urban space where the play is taking place. As an intervention through play, Camover uses the appropriative nature of play to make a commentary on social and political actions as they take place.

The disruptive nature of play allows us to understand the perils of play as well. By disrupting the context in which it takes place, play is a creative, expressive force. But this force has its dangers too. Dark play is an exploration of the wild side of play in which players decide to engage in an activity, like Camover, to force an emotional response in those who do not recognize they are actually playing.[57] The disruptiveness of play is used to shock, alarm, and challenge conventions.[58]

The disruptiveness of play can be extended to more dangerous realms too.[59] Play can disrupt our mental balance. It can be addictive through gambling, for example, buying lottery

tickets or playing slot machines designed for tempting our base impulses with a calculated chain of wins and losses.[60] The disruptiveness of play means that sometimes it's not the world we look at through the lens of play but an abyss—the profound contradictions and risks that our fragile minds accept taking. If we are only mildly tempted, we become spoilsports, cheaters;[61] if we are deeply enthralled, we lose ourselves in play. Play is disruptive, and it can be dangerous through its disruptiveness.

Play is autotelic—an activity with its own goals and purposes, with its own marked duration and spaces and its own conditions for ending.[62] This is a common point with conventional understandings of play.[63] However, the boundaries of autotelic play are not formally rigid; there is no clear demarcation between the world of the game and the world at large.[64] Play is autotelic in its context, but it is also negotiated. Its autotelic nature is always being discussed and negotiated. We play by negotiating the purposes of play, how far we want to extend the influences of the play activity, and how much we play for the purpose of playing or for the purpose of personal expression.

Play has a purpose of its own, but the purpose is not fixed. Play activities can be described as diachronically or synchronically autotelic, focusing on how the purpose of play evolved though the play session or looking at what particular purpose a particular instance of play had in a particular session. We can start playing with a purpose and decide to change our goals midway, either alone or in negotiation with others. Play negotiates its autotelic goals and purposes as part of playing.

Let's look at an example: the purpose of playing a game like *Vesper.5* that allows players to make only one move a day.[65] We don't play it for the action or for the way it entertains us. *Vesper.5* gives us a ritual that is play too. We play it to explore, to

learn about ourselves, because we find it interesting, because it has meaning for us and we let it in our lives every day: one move and then a twenty-four-hour wait. This exercise in patience—a game, yes, in which we play more than just the game—is also a companion, a timed excuse for playing every day. Its purpose is to exist, to let us play, and the purpose of playing with it is nothing else than just playing. Playing *Vesper.5* is also negotiating why and how we play this game.

Play is creative, in that it affords players different degrees of expression inherent in the play activity itself. Playing is both accepting the rules of the game and performing within them according to our needs, personality, and constitution of a playing community. Play is the act of creatively engaging with the world, with technologies, contexts, and objects, from games to toys and playgrounds, exploring them through ludic interaction.[66] Play creates its objects and communities. To play is to make a world, through objects, with others, for others, and for us. It is a creative way of expression, shared but ultimately personal. Play creates (itself) through objects, rules, players, situations, and spaces.

A good example of this type of expression is the development of tactics in games. When playing a game, players develop tactics, that is, temporally based interpretations of the context of play suited for particular modes of interaction toward particular goals; some of them may be a part of the game and some are purely personal. The tactics are the on-the-fly creative interpretation of a game through the activity of playing it.

Finally, *play is personal*. Even when we play with others, the effects of play are individual, attached to our own sentimental, moral, and political memories. Who we are is also who plays, the kind of person we let lose when we play. Our memories are

composed of these instances of play, the victories and defeats, but also the shared moments.[67] Play is not isolated in our eventful lives; in fact, it is a string with which we tie our memories and our friendships together. Play is a trace of the character that defines us.

Play is finding expression; it is letting us understand the world and, through that understanding, challenging the establishment, leading for knowledge, and creating new ties or breaking old ones. But ultimately whatever we do in play stays with us. Play is a singularly individual experience—shared, yes, but meaningful only in the way it scaffolds an individual experience of the world. Through play, we are in the world.[68]

Play is like language—a way of being in the world, of making sense of it.[69] It takes place in a context as a balance between creation and destruction, between adherence to a structure and the pleasures of destruction.[70] Playing is freedom.[71]

Play is being in the world, through objects, toward others.[72] We play not to entertain ourselves or to learn or be alienated: we play to be, and play gives us, through its characteristics, the possibility of being. As Sartre put it, "The desire to play is fundamentally the desire to be."[73]

2 Playfulness

An iPhone is just a rectangular piece of metal, glass, and plastic; a machine with few moving parts, it does not hint at its potential functionality when it is turned off. But when it's turned on, when software appropriates the hardware,[1] an iPhone is a machine of almost limitless capabilities. It is a tiny computer equipped with a web browser, a music and video player, a gaming console, a lever, a calculator, a camera, and any other thing that Apple allows it to be.[2] An iPhone, or any other smart phone, is the ultimate toy: an empty shell ready to be modified by the power of software.

The case of smart phones illustrates not only the malleable nature of toys as playthings, but also the capacity for some objects to afford playful behaviors. But what do I mean by "playfulness"? The relation between play and playfulness, more than just a casual affair, is extremely important for understanding the ecology of play and playthings.

Many of the technologies that surround us today are somewhat invested in looking like something other what they are or what they can be. A phone does not want to be a phone but a multimedia emotional companion. A television wants to be more than a fireplace substitute: it aspires to become the grandmother

that tells the bedside stories you want her to tell you whenever you want. A fridge will take care of your diet, and your computer is an expressive extension of yourself. Your espresso machine probably loves you.[3]

We live in an era dominated by emotional designs—by objects created with the intention of appealing to our senses and feelings.[4] A typical rhetoric of this postfunctional design makes technologies look and feel more playful. The many animations on the user interface of Apple computers, from the opening of a folder to the minimizing of an application (figure 2.1), are not purely functional design decisions. These user interface designs are driven by a desire to signal that the machine we are interacting with is not a serious computer but something else—something quirky and with personality that will not reject the form of expression through it but will actually encourage creativity.

Tapping on our emotional attachment to things through design is not exclusive of digital technologies. Workplaces and
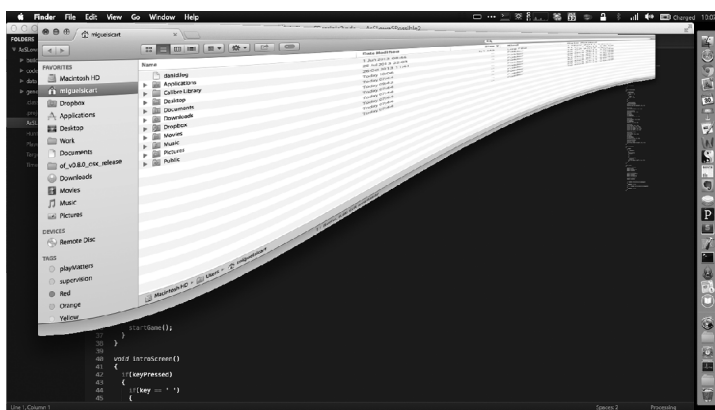
Figure 2.1
Playful user interfaces.

service providers of all kinds want to establish relations where customers or employees feel like play pals rather than mere numbers or cogs of a machine.[5] Modern corporate values are strangely resonant of ideals related to good teammates, that is, to sports and games.[6] We want our modern lives to be dynamic, engaging, and full of the expressive capacities of play.[7] But we also want them to be effective, performative, serious, and valuable.[8] We need play, but not all of it—just what attracts us, what makes us create and perform and engage, without the encapsulated singularity of play.

What we want is the attitude of play without the activity of play. We need to take the same stance toward things, the world, and others that we take during play. But we should not play; rather, we should perform as expected in that (serious) context and with that (serious) object. We want play without play. We want playfulness—the capacity to use play outside the context of play.

Playfulness is a way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context.[9] Colloquially, playfulness can be associated with flirting and seduction: we can be playful during sex, or marriage, or work, though none of those are play. We can be playful with language through satire and puns,[10] and even in the way we engage with our productive labor.[11] However, those activities are most certainly not play; they are flirting, sex, and labor, and thus they have other purposes.

There is an important distinction to be made here. Playfulness is a physical, psychological, and emotional attitude toward things, people, and situations.[12] It is a way of engaging with the world derived from our capacity to play but lacking some of the characteristics of play. Intuitively, we can feel the difference between

play and playfulness. We can also have the vague idea that we can be playful even when playing. Somehow these two concepts are overlapping, but they are not referring to the same thing.

The main difference between play and playfulness is that play is an *activity*, while playfulness is an *attitude*.[13] An activity is a coherent and finite set of actions performed for certain purposes, while an attitude is a stance toward an activity—a psychological, physical, and emotional perspective we take on activities, people, and objects.

From the bully to the socially awkward, to the seducer or the curious, attitudes are somewhat similar to the frames we use to make sense of our social and cultural presence.[14] We talk about people "having an attitude," and product marketers want to change our attitudes toward forgotten brands. Attitudes are projected on the world, and the world can resist these attitudes.[15]

In this sense, playfulness is projecting some of the characteristics of play into nonplay activities. It is an attempt to engage with the world in the mode of being of play but not playing. Sometimes that means to be playful when playing. We are playful in play contexts that are very strictly typified, in which play is bound by the strong enforcement of its structures. For instance, playfulness can take place when games are played or when sports are practiced.[16] Athletes can be playful when they perform in ways that are not optimal for reaching their purpose. Many of the flourishes with which Magic Johnson adorned his basketball game were not practical and goal oriented; they were a show for the gallery, a way of enjoying the game while playing it at the highest stakes. This beautiful playfulness created a stark contrast with the serious context of professional play, making those actions more beautiful and an embodiment of the ideal of the game.

Players of a game are playful when they consciously manipulate the relative rigidity of the system. Dark play is used as a playful approach to play situations, in which the disruptive nature of play can be used to break the conventions of gentrified play contexts. An interesting example of this understanding of play comes from the story of a group of friends who have played tag for twenty-three years.[17] For a month every year, a group of old friends play a game of tag that involves, without making them players, their families, friends, and coworkers. And not only are there players who are not playing (such as wives who act as spies but cannot be It), but also players who don't know they are playing. The employers of these men did not necessarily know about the game being played and involuntarily become pawns in the game. Imagine if the people around you were in fact playing a game you were not aware of. Imagine those multiple worlds being experienced at the same time.[18]

Another case of dark playfulness could be Antonin Panenka's famous penalty shoot in the 1976 Eurocup final against West Germany. Panenka not only made a beautiful gesture when the stakes were highest, he also playfully teased the rival's goalkeeper in a stretch of what is acceptable by sportsmanship values.[19]

In our computational age, playfulness can be seen as a play-inspired revolt against the dictates of the machine. The computer, through seductive functionalities and hidden ubiquity, shapes the tasks we perform as much as we delegate to them.[20] In this context, playfulness is a carnivalesque attack on the seriousness of computers, on the system-driven thinking that gives maximum importance to the dictates and structures of a formal structure. I am not writing here about playful user experience design, but about a darker, more explorative, and expressive approach to our relations to machines. Playfulness can be a

revolt, a carnivalesque exploration of the seams of the technologies that excel at performing operations but limit the expression to that which is computable.

A good example of digital playfulness is Matteo Loglio's DIY (do it yourself) project FAKE COMPUTER REAL VIOLENCE.[21] This project connects an accelerometer to a computer microcontroller in order to measure movement and respond to it, in this case by sending a command to the operative system to restart. The fun aspect is that the project should be placed in a computer case, so when the computer freezes, a physical blow to the case will take us to the restarting menu—effectively responding to our violent attack on the machine. This ironic commentary on our perception of computer failure and our common violent reactions to it playfully allows us to restart our computer by hitting a specially designed USB extension. Equipped with an accelerometer, this extension reacts to the blows of the user by restarting the computer, effectively acting on the user's violent reaction toward the machine.

Playfulness is the carnivalesque domain of the appropriation, the triumph of the subjective laughter, of the disruptive irony over rules and commands. Playfulness means taking over a world to see it through the lens of play, to make it shake and laugh and crack because we play with it. Some objects allow us to see the world through a playful lens; some contexts are more prone to playfulness than others. A classic Goffmanian example would be a Christmas dinner at a company, which is an opening for playfulness in the context of corporate life. It could be argued too that bulletin or image boards on the Internet, particularly those that have strong anonymity settings, encourage a certain playful behavior from the user—one that can range from silly YouTube videos and comments to the more interesting and complex dark

play practiced on occasion in 4chan.org, an image-based bulletin board.

Playfulness glues together an ecology of playthings, situations, behaviors, and people, extending play toward an attitude for being in the world. Through playfulness, we see the world, and we also see how the world could be structured as play. Brendan Dawes's Accidental News Explorer is an app that pulls random pieces of news from different sources (figure 2.2).[22] It provides users with a single input box where they can type a keyword, and the software will find the news for them. It is hardly the most functional news reader ever developed, yet this
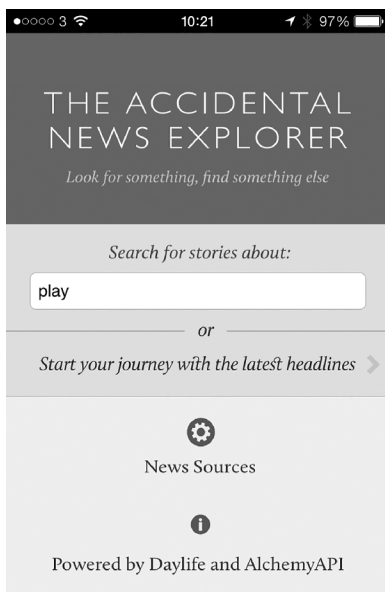

Figure 2.2
The Accidental News Explorer.

serendipitous approach to news forces us to look at its choices with playful astonishment: how could a machine find the news? The news can be playful too.

For the playful attitude to exist as related to the mode of being of play, it needs to share some traits with play. Since playfulness is an attitude that projects some of the characteristics of play into the world, understanding which characteristics of play constitute the playful attitude will allow us to better understand the function of playfulness in the ecology of play.

Let's start where play and playfulness diverge. Play is *autotelic*, an activity with its own purpose. We play for the sake of playing. Since playfulness is an attitude, a projection of characteristics into an activity, it lacks the autotelic nature. Playfulness preserves the purpose of the activity it is applied to: it's a different means to the same end. If it is sex, then the pleasures of sex are the main purpose even if we are playful. If it is using a computer to write a book, the purpose is still writing regardless of how playful we are in the process. Playfulness is not autotelic because it is not an activity. Furthermore, for it to be a productive way of being in the world, it needs to respect the purpose of the activity it is applied to. Otherwise playfulness becomes a destructive force, not engaging with the activity or with the creative capacities of play.[23] Playfulness always respects the purpose of the activity for its own integrity to exist.

This does not mean that playfulness cannot be disruptive. In many cases, a playful attitude will result in a relative disruption of the state of affairs, though without destroying it. The art project My Best Day Ever, by Zach Gage, "automatically searches twitter for the phrase 'my best day ever' and then picks a tweet it likes, and re-tweeters the tweet as its own," as the author describes it.[24] My Best Day Ever is a playful commentary on Twitter, privacy,

and our desire to reach out through impersonal and techno-logically mediated mechanisms. It also shows personality by selecting appropriate tweets and a certain degree of self-irony. It somehow disrupts Twitter as a medium without destroying it, revealing the self-imposed honesty of these media. The activity needs to exist, to be finished, for the playful disruptiveness to be effective. Otherwise it is just destruction, a nihilist attitude different from the creative approach that playfulness affords.

So what does playfulness bring to these other activities? Why does playfulness matter? Playfulness assumes one of the core attributes of play: appropriation. To be playful is to appropriate a context that is not created or intended for play.[25] Playfulness is the playlike appropriation of what should not be play. Brendan Dawes's DoodleBuzz is a "typographic news explorer" in which users can find news pieces by drawing doodles on the web browser canvas.[26] Again, news reading through DoodleBuzz is significantly different from reading it through a conventional news reader; however, the physicality of the interaction (drawing doodles) and the serendipity of the underlying system contribute to the playful experience. Reading news is not supposed to be physical, or drawn by chance. News reading ought to be effective, functional—unless, of course, we want our news consumption to be personal, expressive, and appropriative and to make the news ours by drawing it.

In playfulness, appropriation happens in its pure form, taking over a situation to perceive it differently, letting play be the interpretive power of that context. Appropriation implies a shift in the way a particular technology or situation is interpreted. The most usual transformation is from functional or goal oriented to pleasurable or emotionally engaging. Appropriation transforms a context by means of the attitude projected to it.

Playfulness reambiguates the world.[27] Through the characteristics of play, it makes it less formalized, less explained, open to interpretation and wonder and manipulation. To be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity.

In this sense, the difference between contexts needs to be specified. Play happens in contexts created for play, in those contexts in which the autotelic nature of play is respected.[28] Traditionally these contexts are games, but they can also be playgrounds or temporal contexts such as the lunch break: openings in time and space where play becomes possible. The contexts in which playfulness happens are not designed or created for play: they are occupied by play.

We occupy contexts through playfulness to be creative or disruptive. A PowerPoint presentation can be a dry showcase of charts and numbers, or a dynamic visual experience of data.[29] Similarly, data visualization has become a contemporary playground for the exploration of how data can be made significant and more visible through playfulness. Projects like Live Plasma,[30] a visualizing tool that helps recommend music to users, or Twitter Earth,[31] a tool that locates a tweet on a three-dimensional representation of the globe based on the location data embedded on the tweet, are examples of playful interpretations of data. This approach is also closely related to the aesthetics of play and playfulness. Julian Oliver's Packet Garden visualizes network traffic by growing a world, each network package or communication activity translated into a geographical or ecological element of that world.[32] Uploads are hills, and there are HTTP plants and peer-to-peer plants.

These are creative appropriations of data through playfulness, revealing new knowledge through play. Playful appropriation allows for the expression of idiosyncrasies in even the most

rigid of contexts. Through playfulness, we open the possibility of expressing who we are. Even in instrumental situations, personality is tied to performance, to the fulfillment of schedules. Playfulness frees us from the dictates of purpose through the carnivalesque inheritance of play. Through playful appropriation, we bring freedom to a context.

Playfulness can be used for disruption, revealing the seams of behaviors, technologies, or situations that we take for granted. The Newstweek project literally takes over open wireless networks to playfully manipulate news consumption (by manipulating the headlines of major news providers in real time), shattering our assumptions on networks, news, and consumption of stories through online gatekeepers.[33] Similarly, Moss Graffiti can take over spaces such as parks, often carefully walled against their own users, and make them playfully public again.[34] Through playfulness, we incorporate a personal view into the situations we live in. Playfulness, like a carnival, is an opening toward critique and satire, toward freedom in the context of mundane activities.

There is one last characteristic of play that is present in the playful attitude: play is personal, and playfulness is used to imbue the functional world with personal expression. If we look at the evolution of modern personal computing, from the desktop to the mobile, we see how machines have become more flexible toward personalization. We can change screen backgrounds, or ring tones, and through them we express ourselves. The temporary popularity of using an old-fashioned ringing sound with a modern mobile phone was a way of playfully relating to the machine itself and its nature. The dissonance between technology and sound was supposed to be not only ironic but also personal.

Through playfulness we personalize the world; we make it ours while still acknowledging that it has a purpose other than playing. Through playfulness, we bring the creative and free personal expression that play affords to a world outside play, and therefore we make the world personal.

Of course, the world might resist. In fact, many situations, contexts, and objects are specifically designed to resist playfulness; the instrument panels of planes or other critical systems should not be toyed with. Regardless of the positive values we give as a society to creativity and play, there is still a tension between labor and expression, between functionality and emotions. The functional tradition in design focused on efficiency and productivity.[35] This modernist dream is Tati's nightmare in the film *Playtime*, which chronicles the slow but finally triumphant flow of play in the rationalist world of modernist France. That was a world in which technology guided people through the straps of daily production and efficiency. *Playtime* is a song of freedom, an ironic view on playfulness taking over the dullness of everyday life. That is why playfulness matters: it brings the essential qualities of freedom and personal expression to the world outside play.

The traditions in design, however, seem to focus on preventing playfulness, on resisting by design the temptation of appropriation. Even Apple computers, the most voluntarily playful of computing environments, are carefully engineered to allow only certain sanctioned types of playfulness. More than a prop for play, Apple technologies, like so many others, present themselves as a referee more than a player.

Designing playfulness is more complex than what it might seem. One of the advantages of functional design is the relative

predictability of the outcome: because an object is designed with its function in mind, all of its elements are guided toward that purpose and all deviant behaviors can be minimized. Household appliances are often good examples of this, easing our daily tasks but not necessarily enhancing our experience of the mundane. When I compare my fridge or dishwasher with my computer or a car dashboard, I can see how performance is paramount to the design. I do not care about my fridge; I have no emotional feelings toward it. It is functional but not emotional.[36]

Playful designs are by definition ambiguous, self-effacing, and in need of a user who will complete them. Playful design breaks away from designer-centric thinking and puts into focus an object as a conversation among user, designer, context, and purpose. In fact, what playful design focuses on is the awareness of context as part of the design. Rather than imposing a context, playful designs open themselves to interpretation; they suggest their behaviors to their users, who are in charge of making them meaningful. Playful designs require a willing user, a comrade in play.[37]

This approach to design downplays system authority,[38] a minor but crucial revolt against the relative scientism of design, from games to word processors.[39] Playful design is personal in both the way the user appropriates it and the way the designer projects her vision into it. It's a more challenging object, a statement about rather than an acknowledgment of function. In that gap, playfulness finds its grip to appropriate the object, to make it an expression rather than a product.[40]

Playful technologies are designed for appropriation, created to encourage playfulness. These objects have a purpose, a goal, a function, but the way they reach it is through the oblique,

personal, and appropriative act of playfulness. They do not become toys or pure playthings, but the behavior and attitudes toward them, the ways they redefine the contexts in which they are applied, invoke the characteristics of play.[41]

Playful technologies are mostly extreme ideas implemented in the relative safety of academic labs and blue-sky projects.[42] These are objects that work very well in controlled environments: the studio, the art gallery.[43] But playful design still has to find its place in the uncontrolled environment of everyday life. We are comfortable with functionality, with surrendering our expressive capacities to objects that seem playful but are not radically so.

One of the most interesting examples is Apple's Siri, the artificial intelligence helper. Introduced with the iPhone 4S, Siri is a voice-activated assistant that can help phone users perform mundane tasks, such as place phone calls, make appointments, or find locations. Technologically, Siri is an impressive achievement, but its playful design is even more interesting.

Siri could have been an efficient, task-driven system, a ruthless parser of voices that would neglect to recognize anything outside its instructions database. However, Siri's designers are aware of the mischievous playfulness of users, and they prepared for it. Siri has answers for marriage proposals or questions about religion and the meaning of life (figure 2.3).[44] Siri has a personality: she is quirky, ironic, even a bit dry. Siri is a playful design that breaks our expectations and gives personality to software. It is far from being an ideal playful design, because it resists extreme appropriation (users cannot program Siri, and Siri is one for all users). However, it is a successful commercial product that defies conventionalism regarding functionality and personality. By being playful, Siri becomes a companion more than a tool.[45]
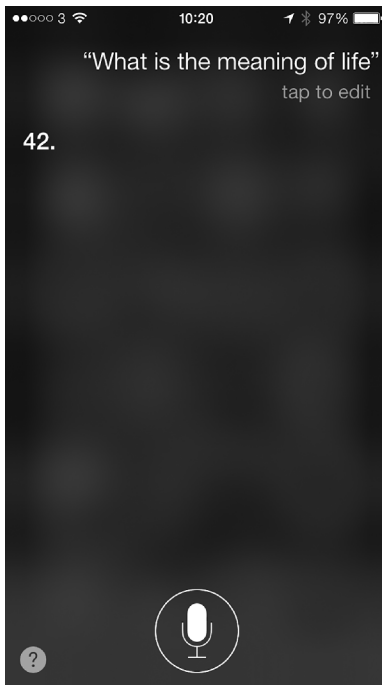
Figure 2.3
Siri is a geek.

We need more objects that allow us to be playful. We need to take the capacity of appropriation and make a world that does not resist it. At stake is more than our culture of leisure or the ideal of people's empowerment; at stake is the idea that technology is not a servant or a master but a source of expression, a way of being. These designs need to exist so we can make technologies ours, and our being in the world a personal affair.

Playfulness allows us to extend the importance of play outside the boundaries of formalized, autotelic events, away from

designed playthings like toys, or spaces like the playground or the stadium. It effectively allows seeing how play is a general attitude to life. Playfulness expands the ecology of play and shows its actual importance not only in the making of culture but also in the very being of human, on how being playful and playing is what defines us. We are because we play, but also because we can be playful.