

What Makes Us Able to Play Critically?

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of “critical play” comes from Mary Flanagan and her work on games designed for political, aesthetic, and social critique (2009). According to her, critical play is a form of creative exploration of the social and the political. It is a radical way to challenge ideas, beliefs and social expectations through the creation of “play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life” (Flanagan 2009, 6). This extended abstract builds on Flanagan’s notion of critical play by coming back to the question: what does it mean to play *critically*? By taking a step outside of video games and entering into the “real world”, this is an attempt to unfold some of the psychological conditions for critical play, in order to understand how these lead to certain experiences. This is done by putting the focus on attitudes or states of mind held by the players. It is an exploration of three different, but intimately intertwined, playful states of mind which I argue are enablers for critical play to occur in a real-world environment, namely *brink awareness*, *boundary flexibility* and *openness to ‘world’-travelling*. These will be briefly elaborated upon in this abstract, with the intention to set the ground for future work.

MENTAL AND SOCIAL BOUNDARIES OF PLAY

When play takes place not in a special, isolated playground, but in environments not designed for or associated with play (but perhaps with work or ritual), all sorts of tensions will naturally arise. This doesn’t necessarily stop people from playing there, on the contrary, it potentially makes play even more thrilling or interesting. Tensions can be used deliberately to place a focus on dominant social norms and conventions, or on rituals shaped by ideologies and power. However, for play to be sustained, or to occur at all, it needs to be bounded both mentally and socially.

According to Stenros, it is important to differentiate between these two boundaries; the psychological border set up by adopting a playful mindset (or “lusory attitude” as Suits would call it (2005)) and the border set up socially through negotiation between the participants (2012, 1). The mental border (or psychological bubble) of play is experienced as a “protective frame which stands between you and the ‘real’ world” (Apter 1991, 15). Additionally, when there is more than one person engaged in playful activity, a social contract is established between the participants (or what Stenros defines as the “magic circle”). The function it serves is to sustain play even though players might slip in and out of the playful mindset (Stenros 2012).

DIFFERENT STATES OF MIND IN CRITICAL PLAY

Through play we appropriate and reinvent the world around us (Henricks 2015; Sicart 2014). If the playful mindset is an important condition for play to be entered into (just as the social contract is to sustain it), the question is which additional attitudes or states of mind are significant in the process of critical play. What makes us able to play *critically*?

Brink Awareness

The state of mind that I here call “brink awareness” is inspired by Cindy Poremba’s work on brink games and brink play. These are games, or play, that explore the fringes of the magic circle. It is a transgression of, or at least, a play with “the contested space at the boundary of games and life” (Poremba 2007, 772). Poremba draws on Luhmann’s work on functional systems theory to tease out how this type of play has critical potential.

When play takes place in an environment which is constantly challenging its existence, it forces participants to experience a “second order observation” (Luhmann 2012) of the boundaries between inside and outside, game and life. This “brink awareness” has the potential for players to become conscious of social norms and conventions as well as of legal boundaries, as they are dependent on them when navigating the play situation.

Boundary Flexibility

Sociologist Christena Nippert-Eng has developed a concept of play she calls “boundary play”, which is about redrawing, or even inverting, the classificatory boundary between two related, cultural-cognitive categories or polarities, such as powerless-powerful, private-public, masculine-feminine, and real-pretend (2005). Boundary play manifests both in players’ behaviour as embodied performances, and in their conversations.

In order for boundary play to take place, according to Nippert-Eng, players must possess not only shared normative categorical knowledge, but also a flexible mind allowing for categorical imagination – what I call “boundary flexibility”. This includes the ability to translate “their alternative mental boundary redrawings into behaviours that are both recognizable and perceived as playful and compelling by those with whom they wish to play” (Nippert-Eng 2005, 305).

Openness to ‘World’-Travelling

Feminist philosopher and activist María Lugones has brought to my attention a particular feature of the outsider's existence – what she calls ‘world’-travelling (1987). The travelling she refers to is the conscious shift from “the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where she is more or less ‘at home.’” (Lugones 1987, 3). Outsiders to the mainstream practice ‘world’-travel mostly out of necessity, but as Lugones points out, this exercise can just as well be carried out wilfully and playfully by the outsider, or by those who are at ease in the mainstream.

How then is one open to ‘world’-travelling? For Lugones, this form of travel is not about acting but more about becoming. She underlines that these journeys are not to be undertaken with an agonistic mindset which would make the traveller into a conqueror, an imperialist. Nor is it about abandoning oneself or being too rooted anywhere. Rather it is about fostering a creative attitude towards ‘worlds’ in general. Or as she puts it, it is about being open to “understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (Lugones 1987, 17).

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