Devil's Plaything: On the Boundary between Playful and Serious

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ABSTRACT

With point of departure in the concepts of *positive negative experiences* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010), *deep play* (Geertz, 1973, 432-433; Schechner 2013, 118-119), *brink play* (Poremba 2007), and the *bleed effect* (Montola 2010; Waern 2010), this paper discusses how games tackle serious and controversial issues in the context of play. The paper's central argument is that seriousness is not only possible in games and play, but that seriousness is a prerequisite and a necessary aspect of all play activities.

Keywords
Playfulness, seriousness, deep play, brink play, positive negative experiences, the bleed effect

INTRODUCTION

The notion that play and games are non-serious, safe, and have no consequences to life, has been contested on several occasions (e.g. Geertz 1973, 432-433; Malaby 2007, 107; Montola 2010; Schechner 2013, 118-119; Taylor 2006, 151-155), and there is today relative agreement in game studies that games and play indeed may be unsafe, have consequences outside the game, and present topics that deal with political issues, the human condition, and sensitive matters in a mature and reflective way. There has, however, not been much research on how games are able to uphold the balance between playful and serious in such contexts. Through the exploration of concepts and theories that may explain this balance, I will in this paper reinforce the idea that there is no contradiction between playful and serious in play situations and that playfulness does not imply an absence from seriousness. On this ground, I will show that playfulness requires that the player takes the social contract seriously in several ways. I will argue that seriousness is not only possible in games and play, but that seriousness must be understood as a prerequisite and necessary aspect of all play activities.

This paper is an exploratory discussion of ideas and concepts relevant for a planned research project on how games tackle serious, controversial and transgressive issues in

the context of play. While the paper and the project as such are related to the genre of serious games by focusing on the ability of games and play to go beyond entertainment and follow a particular agenda, it is important to point out that neither paper nor project is limited to this genre. Instead, the purpose of this work is to show that games – whether digital or analogue – have a core of seriousness that makes them particularly qualified to deal with sensitive and controversial topics. *Seriousness* in this sense may refer to different things. On the most general and play-internal level, seriousness concerns a sincere attitude towards the play situation. But as the paper will show, seriousness is also about creating an awareness of topics and experiences of an ethical, cultural, political, or philosophical nature, which require reflection on a level that goes beyond solving game challenges.

After a short delimitation of play and playfulness and the idea of gameplay as ambiguous and liminal, the paper will focus on the playful mindset and how this mindset always is on the brink of breaking its own existence as playful due to its inherent seriousness. The paper will then go on to discuss the concepts of *positive negative experiences* (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010), *deep play* (Geertz, 1973, 432-433; Schechner 2013, 118-119), *brink play* (Poremba 2007), and the *bleed effect* (Montola 2010; Waern 2010) with point of departure in how these tackle the border between playful and serious. I will argue that this boundary is deliberately being played with in many games and that it this has a particularly powerful potential in fiction-based games, because the playful and the fictional mindsets (Jørgensen 2013) may be utilized against each other.

PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS

Play is a word used to include a range of varied activities such as for instance the playing of music, participate in a play, play as pretense, joking, deceiving, gambling, and the playing with games and toys (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 303; Schechner 2013, 91). Play is often seen in connection with games, and the two have different relationships in different languages. In Scandinavian languages one can "play a play" and "game a game"; while in English one generally "plays a game" or simply "plays" (Juul 2005, 28-29). It is generally agreed that *games* refer to structured and formalized activities, while *play* is a free-form and more permeable activity. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define play as "free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 304), and argue that play is something that occurs both in opposition to and through exploring and experimenting with the rigid structures. Following Richard Schechner, most play acts are managed by certain agreed-upon rules, but many may also have no articulated rule set. Rules may change during the course of play, or playing with the rules or the structure of play may be the point of play itself. Further, play is about creating "multiple realities with porous boundaries", and has a performative character even when carried out in private (Schechner 2013, 92).

According to Salen and Zimmerman, play is often understood as an overarching category of activities that includes games, but play is also often understood as one of several essential components of games. This allows us to understand play as an activity particularly associated with games (gameplay), but also as ludic activities that we are performing in other non-game situations, or to a playful state of mind (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 303). When I am talking about playfulness in this paper, it is this

experiential aspect I am most interested in: *playfulness as a mindset* and an attitude that must be entered willingly when encountering activities connected to games and play. Playfulness is in this sense a subjective mood that may change during the course of play (Schechner 2013, 94, 96). This is in agreement with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who argues that play cannot be defined with reference to structure or behavior, but is dependent upon the participant's perspective: "An activity is not play because it suspends or evades the rules of reality, but because the player freely accepts the goals and rules that constrain his or her actions, knowing full well that he or she need not do so" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, 20). Playfulness is in this sense not only about submitting to the rules of the situation, but about taking the frames of a particular play situation seriously. It is about judging the play activity as an autotelic activity which is serious within its own frames of reference.

PLAY AS SEPARATE BUT INFUSING LIFE

Some scholars postulate that games are played inside a *magic circle* (Huizinga 1955, 10), a boundary "established by the act of play" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 94). According to Jaakko Stenros there are different understandings of this border: it may be understood as the spatial arena itself, the social border defined by negotiation, or the psychological border defined by the mindset of the player (Stenros 2012). In any case, the magic circle is established as a contract between the players and the game, and is often seen as what separates the game activity from everyday life (Huizinga 1955, 13; Caillois 2001, 9-10), implying that the game is "safe" (Crawford 1982) or "not serious" (Huizinga 1955, 13). The idea that games and play lack seriousness has been contested on several occasions. Karl Groos argued in 1901 that children's play involves skills necessary for survival and is therefore not separate from reality (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 14). Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (2001) both showed how games and play spring out of culture and also affect culture at large. More recently, Thomas Malaby has argued that while games and play are socially constructed to be separable from life "to some degree", he questions whether there is a strong boundary between play and ordinary life (Malaby 2007, 109). In connection with digital games it has been demonstrated that the social situation always will effect what happens in the game (Taylor 2006, 151-155). Also the research on the potential positive as well as the negative impact of games stresses a belief in the idea that games and play have consequences outside themselves.

According to Csikszentmihalyi play is paradoxical because it is supposed to be disengaged from reality at the same time as it performs socializing functions and is the origin from which cultural and social institutions are built. Thus, play is inside and outside of everyday life at the same time, and a subset of life that allows us to "rehearse for the serious business of adaptation" (1981, 14). Another view is taken by Schechner, who claims that "playing is double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously" (2013, 89). To play is at once very real and highly exploratory, and a playful situation may have sudden shifts between serious and fun. As Schechner points out, the mood in a play situation may change completely and swiftly, illustrated by children's play where one may laugh at one moment, then cry, then be angry, before suddenly changing into laughing again. This is not only the case in free-form play, but may also happen in well-structured game situations such as sport events, where an injury to a player in the field risks collapsing the playful mood (Schechner 2013, 96). For Schechner, this ambiguity is not paradoxical, but an inherent characteristic of the playful

situation, but this ambiguity also makes it clear that playfulness is a mindset always on the verge of collapse.

To use Victor Turner's terminology, we may say that play and games by definition are *liminal*. Liminality indicates a phase between two states, a transition point between one reality and another, and is traditionally used to describe rites of passage in human culture (Turner 1974, 58). In rituals, liminality is the threshold point where the participant does no longer have its previous societal role, and still awaits to get assigned a new (Turner 1974, 57). The playful mindset has a liminal quality in that it presupposes a particular kind of situation, a specifically defined reality where actions must be judged with the basis that they are carried out in a particular playful circumstance. At the same time, however, playfulness is not *on* the threshold between different states, but absorbs features from both side of the threshold. While rituals are liminal in the sense that the participant is in a mode that is neither sacred nor profane, games and play take the opposite stance by being both fun and non-fun at the same time. Games and play are both deadly serious and unserious at the same time; they are both significant and trivial at the same time. There is an oscillation between these apparently contrasting modes, which means that at a specific moment in the play situation, one mode will be more clearly present than the other, but the other mode is always lurking there, and may come to forefront at any time. In the play context, the idea of what is real and not is relative, and a play act may be "utterly earnest or entirely playful at the same time" depending on the subjective mood of the participant (Csikszentmihalyi 1981, 19).

On this background, the point I want to make in this paper is that seriousness is an essential characteristic of playfulness, and that playfulness is an ambiguous mindset that always threatens to break itself. This does not mean that playfulness *may include* an aspect of seriousness, but that seriousness is a *necessary* part of playfulness. This is a consequence of accepting the social contract of play, and implies that there is something inherently subversive about play itself because it runs the risk of collapsing its very foundations.

PLAY-INTERNAL SERIOUSNESS

The idea that games and play have an inherent seriousness is not controversial. While a playful mindset requires that the participant takes the playful situation seriously as a frame of reference, this demand is more explicit in rule-regulated games than in free-form play.

With reference to Jane McGonigal, Sebastian Deterding et al. separate between the mindsets activated in game and play. While playfulness is about an exploratory, spontaneous and free-form attitude associated with unstructured play, *gamefulness* is an attitude that denotes the more structured and rule-bound mindset associated with ludic activities (Deterding et al 2011). In the same way as game may be seen as a subset of play, gamefulness may be seen as a subset of playfulness (Jørgensen and Mortensen 2013, 246). Gamefulness denotes a willingness to submit to the game rules suggested by what Bernard Suits calls the *lusory attitude*. When taking on this attitude, players accept rules that restrict freedom of action for the sake of playing a game (Suits 1990: 38-39). The lusory attitude is central to the argument of this paper, as it implies that taking the

rules and gameful frame of reference seriously is required of players when they enter into a game. Moreover, the lusory attitude demands a certain commitment – a player cannot simply quit in the middle of the game without disrupting the game for the other players (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 97). The commitment to the rules demonstrates how gamefulness demands that the player takes the game seriously as an autotelic frame of reference. While being the result of game-internal processes, this seriousness often goes beyond the game itself, demonstrated by how games tend to affect players' moods. This is illustrated by numerous examples of player frustration when fails a challenge after several attempts or when an opponent sabotages a player strategy. When challenges tip into frustration and affect the mood outside of the game, players may often be accused for taking the game too seriously. In other contexts, players are *expected* to take the game seriously. For instance, hardcore gamers and powergamers are known for their high dedication to the game, and professional athletes may have an attitude to the game activity that goes beyond playfulness and becomes dominated by seriousness.

When a player starts to behave unsportsmanlike or starts cheating, they may sometimes be victims of taking the game too seriously. Common for the cheater and the unsportsmanlike player is an extremely dedicated attitude towards the activity itself or the outcome of the game, one that is always at the brink of breaking the sense of playfulness. Unsportsmanlike players and cheaters may be so dedicated to the game that they go beyond the lusory attitude in order to bend the game into a certain direction. As cheaters are "secretly not abiding by the rules (although appearing to do so)" (Consalvo 2009, 7), they refuse the lusory attitude by not being willing to subject to the limitations of the rules, and will instead violate the rules in order to win the game, for instance by giving themselves more resources in the game. Unsportsmanlike players, on the other hand, may follow the rules, but do so "in a way that violates the spirit of the lusory attitude" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 269), for instance by always making decisions in the game that are of the advantage to particular player.

In comparison, game participants who do not accept a playful mindset to begin with are clearly positioning themselves outside the magic circle. Sometimes they also contribute to collapsing the playful attitude of other players. An example of this is the spoilsport, who refuses to accept the social contract and the rules of the game (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 269). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the reason why someone may develop spoilsport behavior in the first place is that they originally may have entered the game with a very serious attitude, but that seriousness at some point became a dominant mood which eventually collapsed the playful aspect of that game. An example is the frustrated player who leaves the game in anger and takes the dice with her.

While seriousness concerns the game situation itself in these examples, they also show that dedication to the game rules in many cases may extend beyond the playful situation. In some cases, specific events in the game may cause a change in mood that breaks the sense of playfulness. While it is generally considered a weakness to let frustration created by the game affect what happens outside the game, the fact that this happens shows that playfulness indeed includes a level of seriousness, and that there is always a risk that playfulness collapses into the all too serious.

PLAY-EXTERNAL SERIOUSNESS

However, the inherent seriousness and the fact that emotions and moods may carry over from play and into non-play are in some cases a characteristic that players would want to harness for the sake of creating particular experiences in games.

The examples above show how a lusory attitude may create seriousness out of frustration and that this indeed may risk collapsing the playful mode completely. However, those who engage in a playful situation generally – unless they are entering the game as a spoilsport – intend to maintain a playful mode and do not want the magic circle to collapse, even when they appreciate – and anticipate – that seriousness may rise as an inherent part of the game activity. My continued argument will echo Janet Murray's argument that once an illusory space is established, it has such a psychological power that it will be maintained even under pressure (Murray 1997, 104). While she discussed the power of the imagination to stay immersed in digital narratives, my argument is that the playful mindset also works according to similar principles and will not easily be broken. Combined with the fact that seriousness is an inherent part of playfulness, this is what allows games to also address serious issues beyond the frames of play.

I will now discuss how playfulness due to the necessary inclusion of seriousness is suitable for tackling controversial subjects in a mature and reflective way. I call this *play-external seriousness* because the experience of seriousness goes beyond dedication to the game rules or the frames of play: It also concerns topics and experiences evaluated as important in a greater context, and which affects the moods of the players, create experiences that feel real, and encourages reflection. An example is how certain design choices can lead the player to reflect ethically over the actions in the game (Sicart 2009, 2013), or how designers can use game mechanics to reflect human experience (Rusch 2009).

Even though play tends to be seen in opposition to work and to the seriousness of life, playing is not safe, according to Schechner. On the contrary, playing may often be physically and emotionally dangerous, while taking place within boundaries that feel safe. Schechner argues that much of the attraction of play is to move towards the edge of what is dangerous (Schechner 2013, 92). One example of this is *deep play*, a term used by Jeremy Bentham and developed by Clifford Geertz. Deep play is play where the risks to the player are so high that it is irrational to engage in the play act at all (Geertz 1973, 432-433; Schechner 2013, 92, 118). Mountain-climbing and race-car driving are typical examples of this. But the risks do not have to be physical, as gambling also can be considered a form of deep play.

Deep play may also be found in Nordic free-form LARPs that promote "positive negative experiences" (Hopeametsä 2008, 195; Montola 2010). A positive negative experience is an intense and distressing experience, which is also considered gratifying because it provokes reflection and allows the participants to gain new insights into and human behavior. Examples of free-form live-action role-playing games that create positive negative experiences are *Gang Rape*, which intentionally creates the unpleasant and repulsive experience of participating in or being the victim of a gang rape; and *The Journey*, a post-apocalyptic scenario featuring human desperation, child abandonment and cannibalism (Montola 2010). When positive negative experiences come into being within the frames of play, they are explored in a physically safe setting. At the same time they are emotionally unsafe: the point of creating positive negative experiences is to have

powerful experiences that emulate emotions from the settings they are illustrating. According to Schechner, this is one of the attractions of playing – although it may not be actually safe, it is a specifically defined space in which the players may feel safe (Schechner 2013, 92). The goal of creating such experiences is not to cause frustration with the game rules or to collapse playfulness, but to reach the very border between playful and serious, and remain there. The aim is to create awareness in the participants by making them feel uncomfortable and start reflecting on the experience.

While it may be possible to argue that it is unethical to stage events such as these in a game, I believe on the contrary that the nature of playfulness as a mindset that integrates seriousness is very fit for this task. The reason is that even though the games stage truly traumatic events, these are carried out in a – relatively speaking – safe setting guided by specific rules that delimit the participants' actions and that ensure that all participants can make informed decisions about whether to join or not (Montola 2010). Also, they offer an arena where activities that are forbidden in actuality can be explored (Sicart 2009, 4).

But how are games like *Gang Rape* and *The Journey* able to uphold playfulness when dealing with such serious topics? I believe that these games are primary examples of playful situations that actually risk of breaking the magic circle. For participants it may be important to know that this is a play situation that they may exit at any time they want, and this may be enough to uphold the magic circle and a playful mindset. At the same time, a part of the playfulness of these games is the knowledge that this is a free-form performative activity in which the actions taken have a different status than if they were taken outside the frames of play (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974). In this sense, such games are in principle not very different from the use of role-play in learning situations (see Livingstone 1983, Thatcher 1990).

The positive negative experiences of the LARPs mentioned above are also closely related to another example of serious playfulness; what Cindy Poremba coins *brink play* (Poremba 2007). With reference to Salen and Zimmerman's description of forbidden play that encourage normally transgressive or taboo behavior (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 479), Poremba coins the term brink play to indicate that such play is on the verge or on a critical point between play and non-play (2007, 772). Brink play is play where the social contract of the play situation is used as an alibi for acting in opposition to what is socially accepted, under the pretense that "it's just a game" (Poremba 2007, 773). In such games, such as Brian Sutton-Smith's example of adolescent kissing games (Sutton-Smith 1971, 213), the very threat of collapsing the boundary between play and non-play and thereby transforming the pretense kissing into actual kissing is what makes such games exciting (Poremba 2007, 776). According to Poremba, brink games draw attention towards its own border, thus forcing reflection over the explicit as well as the implicit rules inside and outside of the game (Poremba 2007, 777). The meaningfulness of brink play is created by the existence and destabilization of the border itself, which must be seen in context with how and why such games are able to uphold playfulness. In such games, playfulness would not come into being were it not for the fact that the boundary always is at risk of collapsing. For this reason the potential seriousness is a defining part of playfulness in such games.

As a potential alibi for carrying out actions outside of social norms, brink play may also happen in digital games. Digital games have a reputation for including transgressive content, and many games invite the player to engage in extreme violence, often without questioning or reflecting upon the seriousness of such topics. The infamous "No Russian" level of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* lets the player be part of terrorist group attack on an airport, and the *Grand Theft Auto* series makes crime and unmotivated violence not

only an accepted but also an expected part of the game. While some players may be more dedicated to gameplay rather than the fictional framework of such games, with brink play in mind it is also likely that some players may be attracted to such games precisely because it allows them to carry out these actions inside a playful framework. Here playfulness is connected to the possibility to explore options that are far outside the bounds of accepted behavior, and experiencing fictional consequences of your actions. While this is obviously "just a game", the fictional contextualization enables the player to see what could have been. The combination of playfulness and fiction is also what makes modern digital games very powerful brink games in this respect: they may fictionally contextualize serious topics and show the dark consequences of one's actions, but even though the game may be frustrating for other reasons, playfulness does not threaten to break because of what happens to the fictional world. This combination of playful and serious is particularly well balanced in digital games where the player must make ethical decisions, or where the player may have a motivation to act in contrast with accepted norms. An example of this is *Dishonored*, a game that subtly pushes the player into taking violent actions because the protagonist has a motive for vengeance.

These examples are particularly powerful because they combine the seriousness of playfulness with a fictional context. In a similar way as playfulness is a mindset that must be willingly accepted, experiencing something as fiction is also dependent upon a particular willingness to accept the fiction as a frame of representation with its own internal reality status (Jørgensen 2013, 70, 121). This combination is also visible in the *bleed effect*, an emotional leakage between the actual player and the fictional character that blurs the boundary between game and reality (Montola 2010, Waern 2010). This leakage may happen when the player's real life and attitudes influence the character's decisions ("bleed in"), or when game events influences the player "despite of the protective framing" ("bleed out") (Montola 2010). An example of *bleed in* is when a player acts out of her own personal conscience, even when the fictional character would obviously have acted differently. An example of *bleed out* is illustrated by Annika Waern who discusses how players of the computer role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins* may "fall in love" with their character's love interest (Waern 2010). With reference to the topic of this paper, the bleed effect is about making what is considered play-internal also play-external – what seems important, serious, or requiring reflection inside the game context also is experienced as important, serious, or requiring reflection outside the game context, and vice versa. Although bleed can have powerful impact in games where fictional characters and contexts are important, it can also be identified as a psychological effect at work in games in general: It is the bleed effect that is at play when a player in *World of Warcraft* quits the game in frustration after having been ganked[1]. Bleed is also at work when a board game player leaves in anger because other players team up against him in *Twilight Imperium*.

In this sense, bleed is not only an emotional leakage between player and character, but an emotional leakage between what is considered in-game and what is considered out-of-game. It is an emotional leakage that brings the seriousness of a particular game or play situation into the rest of the world, and which also the play situation to take on emotions and experiences that are normally associated with serious, non-play situations. As Markus Montola argues, bleed is based on a "double consciousness" where "players both acknowledge and deny the nature of play" (Montola 2010). This means that playfulness can be a frame for coping with difficult experiences because it creates a framework where players "pretend to believe that *this is just a game*, holding on to the alibi while forfeiting some of the protection" (Montola 2010). Since games and play are metacommunication – it uses actions and signs that would indicate one thing in one context, but which in the

context of play mean something different (Bateson 1972, 180). This is on par with Schechner's explanation of why tragedy and violent games may be seen as playful: "Because these arts and entertainments refer to that which, if real, would be painful". In this sense, playfulness invites the exploration of serious topics because, in Bateson's theory, it allows the players to "express aggression without doing harm. (...) [S]uch playing does good by clearly outlining the play frame and keeping the performance inside it" (Schechner 2013, 103).

CONCLUSION: SERIOUSLY PLAYFUL

This paper has discussed playfulness as a mindset which at the core is inherently serious. When accepting an activity as a play or game situation, participants accept a contract that commits them to take that situation seriously. While this does not mean that they must subject to the game rules for any reason, they must regard the rules of the game or the bounds of play as the framework for behavior that should be followed, bended or broken.

The requirement to take the playful mindset seriously may be the only rule that all games and play situations have in common. This is an important rule because of its implications. If the player is willing to take the playful frame seriously, it also indicates that they are willing to accept the situation that is presented within that framework. If playfulness in a given situation means pretending that the floor is lava, then behavior must be adapted to that framework. Or if playfulness in another situation means acting out the roles and experiences connected to a rape, this is what must be taken as the framework for action. The inherently serious aspect of playfulness makes play flexible enough to tackle both the trivial and the controversial.

The paradox is of course that when playfulness becomes serious, there is a risk of collapsing the playful mode completely. With reference to concepts such as positive negative experiences, deep play, brink play and bleed, the paper has argued that the balance between playful and serious is maintained through the participants' knowledge that the activity they are engaging in is a game. It is when this understanding breaks that playfulness also breaks. This is what happens when a player becomes frustrated and quits the game or becomes a spoilsport: the activity is no longer experiences as playful, and the participants do not longer feel like a player anymore.

This theoretical paper is an attempt of developing an understanding of playfulness that takes into consideration the idea that seriousness always is a part of playfulness, and that playfulness for this reason always is at the brink of collapsing. Most situations balance perfectly on the edge, but sometimes the activity becomes too playful or too serious, thereby running the risk of collapsing. This paper has been able to make an early stab at understanding this balance, and a natural next step would be to study how empirical players experience this balance.

ENDNOTES

1 *Ganking* is to "kill another player repeatedly, and is mostly used when an overwhelming opposition singles out one target and keeps tracking this one target down" (Mortensen 2008, 219).

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