

# A tour of some old concepts and their relationship to play, to video games, to writing

For references etc. see:

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/talks/ludiclit.html>

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1

## Preface

This symposium spans the area implied by this table, but this talk addresses only where the ticks are:

	Literature	Video Games	Other media
Theory	✓	✓	✓
Creators / Makers / Authors ....			

Page 2 of 15

## Preface

This talk surveys some old concepts that should in principle apply to the latest ideas on literature, on writing, and on designing video games.

But do they? How?

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Extensive pointers, notes and references to the literature are in a companion web page to this talk. Accessed through:

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/talks/ludiclit.html>

Page 3 of 15

## Plan-first or Play-first?

Source: Midge McLundie's PhD thesis

People tend to use *either* a plan-first or a play-first approach to creating an essay or novel or software application or sculpture or ..... And to resist pressure to adopt the other approach.

Page 4 of 15

## Fun, Play, and learning (1 of 3)

Play is activity that uses a pre-decided action to discover what the result will be.

(Rather than "work" which pursues a pre-decided effect and adapts actions until it is achieved.)

Some things we do to get a specific end we want (food, ....); other things we do to find out what will happen. The latter is play.

Walking up a hill to see what you can see.

Endlessly playing a video game to see how an orc behaves, whether you can reach the next level, ...

Reading a novel to see what happens next; what happens in the end ....

Seeing who will win the championship THIS year.

Page 5 of 15

## Fun, play, and Learning (2)

Play is activity that uses a pre-decided action to discover what the result will be.

Play always results in discovery i.e. learning (trivial or valuable), although this is often itself undertaken for other reasons.

Similarly, much learning does not involve play. Play is only one method for learning.

Fun is pleasurable play: done to satisfy some intrinsic motivation ..

Page 6 of 15

# Fun, play, and Learning (3)

Fun is pleasurable play: done to satisfy some intrinsic motivation.

This raises the issue of types of intrinsic motivation.  
(Final ends, not means to an end.)

Some of what follows explores this issue further.

# Readers (1 of 2)

An important point in my talk is to raise the issue that at least some of the concepts relating to the role of maker, inventor, creative artist, designer also apply to the novel reader, game player, art-gazer etc.

Readers (say, of a book), or music listeners, need a combination of surprise (novelty) AND also some expectations that get satisfied. It is the blend that leads to satisfaction and interest together. Total predictability is boring; total randomness is empty and also boring.

The same person at different times wants different combinations. When I'm tired I want "comfort reading": re-reading an old book of an undemanding genre.

When needing something more satisfying, (only) then can Doris Lessing (e.g.) have a go at causing me serious education.

# Readers (2 of 2)

One of the inherent advantages that video games have over novels (say) is that in many games, a player can set themselves goals at several levels of "demanding-ness".

With books, this can only be satisfied by having several books in progress at once.

In general we need to consider readers' responses as well as authors. And that there is not one single "want" even in a single reader.

This undermines the commonsense notion of expecting an author to think of the reader.

As Peter Elbow for one has said:

"Closing my eyes as I speak: An argument for ignoring the audience"

"Very often people don't listen to you when you speak to them. It's only when you talk to yourself that they prick up their ears."

# Flow (1 of 3)

The term "flow" was coined by Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1975).

Unlike other psychologists of the time, he asked what is the nature of our most fulfilling experiences?

"Flow" was his term for this class of experience.  
(New York sculptors were his first set of "subjects".)

Features include:

- Losing track of time
- No puzzle about which action to select next
- No inability to think of any action to do.

But for him, it also requires that the activity relates not merely to pleasure or need, but to some deep intrinsic value the person holds.

# Flow (2)

John Dewey had something interesting to say about this, whether in the classroom or outside.

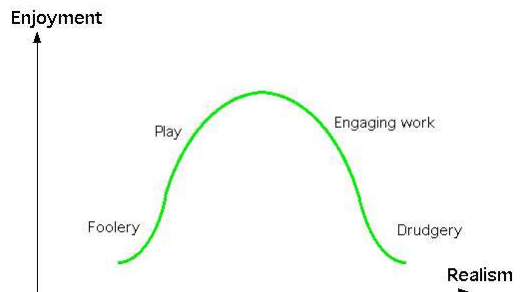
That enjoyment seems to be maximised where learning (novelty) meets "realism" or utility;

In either play / learning that relates to useful things, or work that is interesting because innovative (not mere repetition).

But NOT in drudgery (useful but not interesting) or foolery (play but unrelated to anything that matters).

# Dewey: Realism & enjoyment.

Work & play. Learning and producing.



<Play, doing it for the process ..... doing it for the product, work>

## George Eliot's theory of novels (1 of 2)

Eliot's argument is that reading novels is profoundly educational:

We learn to understand how people different from ourselves feel and think: and this is both useful and makes us better people.

In her words:

"The greatest benefit we owe the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies [empathy]."

Page 13 of 15

## Eliot. Doris Lessing. (2 of 2)

Her argument entails that serious fiction is in some crucial, deep way realistic: about real feelings, and real human experience.

Many today are less attracted to realism, not least because it seems opposed to playfulness (which is also a deep part of human nature).

Yet it may be possible to reconcile the arguments. Oscar Wilde and Ursula Le Guin have made interesting points on this.

Doris Lessing too seems to think as Eliot does; and that consequently novels do educate, and this can be painful; so novels are not necessarily comfortable nor fun:

"If you travel with us you will have to learn things you do not want to learn in ways you do not want to learn".

Page 14 of 15

## A place to stop

For the slides, handout etc. see:

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/talks/ludiclit.html>

15

## Creativity

Maggie Boden has offered an analysis of what is meant by creativity.

The necessary conditions for something to be creative:

1. Human agency (as its cause)
2. Utility (i.e. of value to people)
3. Novelty (as a matter of history)
4. Surprise (contrary to expectations)

Most, perhaps all, cases of creativity amount to two types:

1. New creative solutions to old problems,
2. New creative uses for old methods (machines, objects, genres, tropes, styles, ...).

Page 16 of 15