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Between Desire & Reality

Game design in everyday situations.

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Game Designer, Master of Science in Design for Interaction and Professor at CIDI UNAM, I (almost) hold a PhD in Contemporary Studies by the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at Coimbra University. My research looks into the roles games play in education: from a playful and participatory perspective, peeking into the creative process of artists, scientists and players, to learn how they critically read the world and creatively write, transforming their surroundings into better possible play-ces. My work has been (dis)played, published and awarded on multiple occasions: from workshops, conferences and books, to academic journals, design prizes and festivals.

Palavras-chave: Creative literacy, Experiential learning, Game design, Complex systems & Transdiscipline

My contribution aims to describe a didactical framework aimed at instrumentalizing the Pedagogy of Play (Farné, 2005), looking at the intersection between play and design, drawing on different strategies to perform~transform our surroundings into better possible configurations. From a participatory perspective, the Participatory Game Design Toolkit (PartiTool) invites not to focus all our attention on the objects we design (toys, board games or videogames), but on the process by which others join into play (representation, feedback and experimentation), connecting with friends.

A convivial society should be designed to allow all its members the most autonomous action by means of tools least controlled by others. People feel joy, as opposed to mere pleasure, to the extent that their activities are creative - Iván Illich (1978, p. 30).

In dialogue with the Austrian philosopher, theologian and cultural critic based in Cuernavaca during the 70s, we can think of games as convivial tools when people accord to

behave with no further objective than having a great experience together (which grants games their autotelic character). As detonators of play, the rules are always temporal, self-imposed and naturally evolving to the desires and restrictions of players who can subvert the rules to keep the game ongoing: not too difficult that they become stressful, nor too easy it gets boring. Right there, between their ability to perform and the challenge, playing lies close to the flow state described by Mihály Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

I use this term ‘tool’ because it allows me to subsume into one category all rationally designed devices, be they artifacts or rules, codes or operators, and to distinguish all these planned and engineered instrumentalities from other things such as basic food or implements, which in a given culture are not deemed to be subject to rationalization. School curricula or marriage laws are no less purposely shaped social devices than road networks [...] Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. Industrial tools deny this possibility to those who use them and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others - (Illich, 1979, p. 30, 31)

What Roger Caillois (1958) calls *Ludus*, or “adult” play, focuses players' attention within the limited span of action described by the rules in a similar way as science fiction enthusiasts suspend their disbelief. Only as we stop thinking critically, we can access an universe of possibilities that is completely invisible if we don't agree to play and not only perform. Similarly to Pablo Neruda concept of utopia that points into an horizon that can never be achieved, but sets people into action: a secret impossible to be completely unearthed as once it is discovered, it discloses a new lead

Tools foster conviviality to the extent to which they can be easily used, by anybody, as often or as seldom as desired, for the accomplishment of a purpose chosen by the user. The use of such tools by one person does not restrain another from using them equally. They do not require previous certification of the user. Their existence does not impose any obligation to use them. They allow the user to express [their] meaning in action.“ - (Illich, 1978, p. 32)

1. Participatory Game Design Toolkit

The elements of PartiTool describes the elements of thiPartiTool, based on the basic questions that refer to elements of the MDA Framework (Hunickle *et al.* 2012), iterated across the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) and extended by the Cultural Historical Analysis

(Cole & Engeström's, 1993). This is intended to promote a versatile mindset that can be used in multiple ways depending on the interest of the players, allowing to understand play from a situational perspective that integrates technology with philosophy, social sciences and local stories, by looking into what, who, how, when, which, where and why do people play, pointing their attention into key considerations.

Dimension	Question	Elements
Social	Who?	Players ~ designers
Objective	What?	The gist of the game
Situational	When?	Circumstances: affairs & emotions
Contextual	Where?	The playscape: can be physical, digital, symbolical
Technologic	Which?	The elements of the game: toys, artefacts and infrastructure
Interactive	How?	Bottom-up: attitudes & strategies / Top-down: Rules.
Æstetical	Why?	Aesthetic experience: fun, learning, emotions, etc.
Voluntional	How much?	Motivation: engagement & intensity

Figure 1. PartiTool is like a camera to take a picture of play in a desirable~real situation.

2. Twofold Application: Assimilation~Accomodation

The complexity of play does not reside on the instruments needed (toys, games, instructions, interfaces, etc.), but on how players relate to them, in such a way that the elements described in Table 1 are not isolated from each other, nor are completely abstract. Their intricate

interrelation is so complex that can never be completely described nor predicted, but trying to capture it can help us to understand the ludic phenomena.

Following Piaget and Kolb, PartiTool makes the distinction between the critical-analytical and the creative-projective phases of a continuous learning process where people explore beyond their comfort zone and learn what they need in the moment they can (Farné, 2005): on the first hand, as a set of questions to guide your creativity to look at existing play situations and understand the intricate relationship between the players, their contexts, the time of the day, and the attitudes and emotions that are elicited while playing.

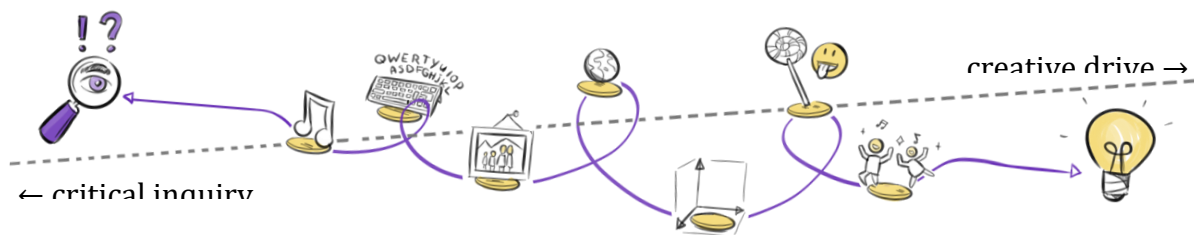


Figure 2. Multimodal communication continuum crossed by the assimilation - accommodation axis.

The second way to use PartiTool is to design new games. Each of the dimensions in this case, turn into a factor to be considered: from the configuration of the tools players need to engage (toys, consoles, rules, etcetera), to the time and context where players meet and the conditions for the game to take place in optimal conditions (right illumination, isolation from the real world, comfortable furniture, etcetera). Rendering a play situation, is as a sort of hypothesis, a leap into the future of how the designers imagine to guide the interaction of the players, while leaving them enough space for players to interpret and generate their own hypothesis of the game.

3. Play~Diseño

As an example to illustrate PartyTool, this section extends a provocation to think of design as a game where players actively

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transform their surroundings to meet their needs and those of their community, using and subverting existing technologies to make their life less boring. Acting as (meta)designers who focus their creative process on the systems, tools and procedures by which we express, Play~Diseño aims to activate readers to engage with their creative practice (whatever it is), playfully and find their own methods to design games systems. By thinking about the stories they tell, the social conditions that surround the players, the origin of the materials and technologies they play with, the interactions that are implemented while they play and how these stories, materials, processes and interactions are coherent to each other and implement their creative intentions.

Originated in academia, this provocation aims to look at study programs as the rules of a game that shall not limit the creativity of the players to certain formats, but as an opportunity to share the responsibility of keeping the learning space vivid, shifting conventional teacher~designer relationships to open dynamics in semicontrolled environments where players assume their agency over their learning process. As binweeds do, vividly growing around the fence and not fighting against the structures that support them. In the terms of Roberto Farné (2005), as a natural inclination to immerse in the chaos of nature, learning what we need at our own

pace, that is shaped culturally, builds identity, health and competence.

As players (teachers, students and school administrators) lose the need to control and trust each other, they consent to engage in spaces that can never be completely pre-defined, emancipating players, who become autonomous and direct their own adventure (Cornú, 1999). Consensus at the center of this constellation reveals the complex nature of play, which responds to the contrast between the rules (represented by teachers, designers and game masters) and the emergence of unexpected behaviours, impossible to predict when all actors engage in creative play.

The figure 3 extends the interactive dimension of play in the two extremes of a scheme. While the top elements refer to the most abstract factors, the bottom stand for the tangible and basic assets to arouse play. As we look closer to the dynamic relationship between the rules and the freedom players have to move within, it becomes possible to differentiate the instructional nature of the rules from the elicited attitudes that happen as players connect to each other. Both refer to the basic question of how people play, while the rules point towards a limited amount of actions allowed within the magic circle (generally defined top-down), the playful attitudes tend to emerge only as the rules become invisible and people engage in ways that are not restrained by the rules, and may even be more attractive or fun that what the designers had originally imagined.

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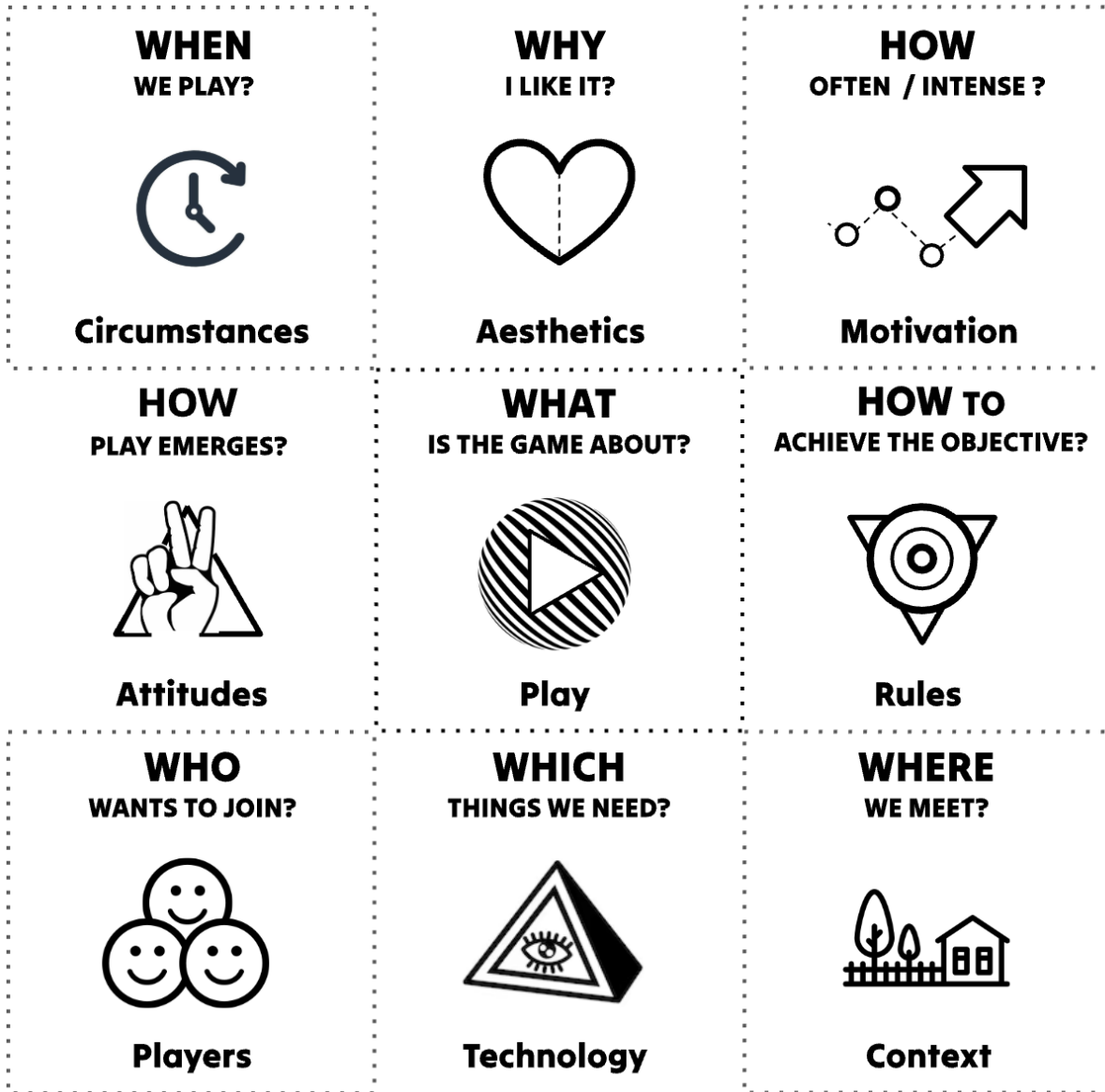


Figure 3. Instructions to think of design as a game: playing to be game designers.

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