reserved.
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Revision 88 / Serial number 840726

West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house,
with a boarded front door.
There is a small mailbox here.

>open mailbox
Opening the small mailbox reveals a leaflet.

>take leaflet
Taken.

>read leaflet
"WELCOME TO ZORK!

ZORK is a game of adventure, danger, and low cunning. In
it you will explore some of the most amazing territory
ever seen by mortals. No computer should be without one!"

>

MEANINGFUL PLAY

meaning
designed choice
action
outcome
discernability
integration

3

We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or not bite hard, your brother's ear. They pretend to get terribly angry. And—what is most important—in all these doings they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment. Such rompings of young dogs are only one of the simpler forms of animal play. There are other, much more highly developed forms: regular contests and beautiful performances before an admiring public.

Here we have at once a very important point: even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.—**Johann Huizinga,** Homo Ludens

Introducing Meaningful Play

Johann Huizinga is one of the greatest scholars of play in the twentieth century. His groundbreaking book, *Homo Ludens,* is a unique investigation of the role of play in human civilization. The title is a play on *Homo Sapiens,* and translates as *Man the Player.* According to Huizinga, play and games, which have been maligned in recent history as trivial and frivolous, are in fact at the very center of what makes us human. "Play is older than culture," as Huizinga puts it, and *Homo Ludens* is a celebration of play that links the visceral, combative nature of contest directly to war, poetry, art, religion, and other essential elements of culture. *Homo Ludens* is, in many ways, an attempt to redefine and elevate the significance of play.

Huizinga's vision of play offers a perfect point of departure for the development of the concept of meaningful play. We begin with a close reading of one section of the opening passage from *Homo Ludens:*

> It [play] is a significant function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.[1]

Huizinga emphasizes the fact that all play means something, that there is "sense" to play, that it transcends. The idea that "all play means something" is a wonderfully complex statement we can interpret in a variety of ways. In fact, all of the following are possible readings of the text:

- Huizinga says that play is a *significant function.* Does this mean that play is an important (and possibly unrecognized) force in culture—that it is significant in the way that art and literature are? Or does he mean that play *signifies*—that it is a symbolic act of communication?
- He mentions that there is *some sense* to play. Does he mean that play isn't soley chaotic, but is instead an event that can be understood and analyzed if one looks closely enough? Or is he implying that sense itself (the opposite of nonsense) is something intrinsically related to play?
- There's the complex statement: *In play there is something "at play."* Does Huizinga mean that there is always something deeper "at play," which constitutes any instance of play we observe in the real world? Or that in play something is always in motion, never fixed, and in a constant state of transformation?
- This "at play" quality of play *transcends the immediate needs of life.* Does the word "transcend" imply something spiritual? Or does Huizinga simply mean that play creates an artificial space beyond that of ordinary life?
- The same "at play" characteristic of play *imparts meaning to the action.* Does the fact that play is always "at play" relate to the meaning of the action? Or does it imply that play must be understood as one element of a more general system out of which meaning grows?
- The passage concludes with the sentence, *All play means something.* But what does play mean? To who or what is it meaningful? What is the process by which meaning emerges from play?

These are complex and multi-layered questions, lacking definitive answers. In some sense, each of the interpretations posed are implied in Huizinga's statement, and all of them point to key aspects of play and play's participation in the creation of meaning. These important questions, and their possible answers, contain all of the main themes of this book. We will, in the pages that follow, investigate the intricate relationships among game design, play, and meaning.

Meaning and Play

Meaning, meaning, meaning. If you repeat the word enough, you can almost coax it into the realm of pure non-sense. Because asking about the meaning of meaning can quickly turn into a jumbled, meaningless mess, let's frame the connection between play and meaning as simply as we can. In the game of Pong, for example, the meaning of the interaction between player and game is mediated by play, from the play of

pixels representing the ball, to the play of the mechanical knobs controlling the digital paddles, to the competitive social force of play between opponents. It is for these reasons, and many others, that game designers should care about the relationship between meaning and play.

Learning to create great game experiences for players—experiences that have meaning and are meaningful—is one of the goals of successful game design, perhaps the most important one. We call this goal the design of *meaningful play,* the core concept of our approach. This concept is so critical to the rest of this chapter that we are going to repeat ourselves: *the goal of successful game design is the creation of meaningful play.* Meaningful play is that concept which can address all of the "unanswerable" questions raised by Huizinga. It is also a concept that raises questions of its own, challenging assumptions we might have about the role of design in shaping play.

One of the difficulties in identifying meaningful play in games is the near-infinite variety of forms that play can take. Here are some examples:

- the intellectual dueling of two players in a well-met game of Chess
- the improvisational, team-based balletics of Basketball
- the dynamic shifting of individual and communal identities in the online role-playing game EverQuest
- the lifestyle-invading game Assassin, played on a college campus

What do all of these examples have in common? Each situates play within the context of a game. Play doesn't just come from the game itself, but from the way that players interact with the game in order to play it. In other words, the board, the pieces, and even the rules of Chess can't alone constitute meaningful play. Meaningful play emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played. Understanding this interaction helps us to see just what is going on when a game is played. One way of framing what players do when they play a game is to say that they are making choices. They are deciding how to move their pieces, how to move their bodies, what cards to play, what options to select, what strategies to take, how to interact with other players. They even have to make the choice whether or not to play!

When a player makes a choice within a game, the action that results from the choice has an outcome. In Chess, if a player moves a piece on the board, this action affects the relationships of all of the other pieces: one piece might be captured, or a king might suddenly find itself in check. In Assassin, if a player stealthily stalks her target and manages to shoot him with a dart gun, the overall game changes as a result of this action: a hit is scored, the victim is out for the rest of the game, and he must give *his* target name to the player that just shot him. In EverQuest, if you engage with and kill a monster, the stats and equipment of your character can change; the larger game-world is affected as well, even if it simply means that for the moment there is one less monster.

Playing a game means making choices and taking actions. All of this activity occurs within a game-system designed to support meaningful kinds of choice-making. Every action taken results in a change affecting the overall system of the game. Another way of stating this point is that an action a player takes in a game results in the creation of new meanings within the system. For example, after you move a piece in Chess, the newly established relationships between Chess pieces gives rise to a new set of meanings—meanings created by the player's action.

Two Kinds of Meaningful Play

We define meaningful play in two separate but related ways. The first sense of meaningful play refers to the way game actions result in game outcomes to create meaning. Framing the concept in this way, we offer the following definition:

***Meaningful play* in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The *meaning* of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome.**

Think about an informal game of "Gross-Out" played during an elementary school recess. One by one, players tell a gross-out story, each tale more disgusting than the last. When a story is finished the group spontaneously and collectively responds, confirming or denying the player's position as master of the playground, until an even grosser story is told.

If we look at Gross-Out from the perspective of meaningful play we see that a player takes an action by telling a story. The *meaning* of the action, as a move in a game, is more than the narrative content of the story. It is also more than the theatrics used to tell the story. The outcome of the storytelling action depends on the other players and their own voting actions. Meaningful play emerges from the collective action of players telling and rating stories. The *meaning* of the story, in the sense of meaningful play, is not just that Hampton told a whopper about his big sister eating a live beetle—it is that Hampton's story has beaten the others and he is now the undisputed Gross-Out king.

This way of understanding meaningful play refers to the way *all* games generate meaning through play. Every game lets players take actions, and assigns outcomes to those actions. We therefore call this definition of meaningful play *descriptive,* because it describes what happens in every game. This is our first understanding of meaningful play.

At the same time, some games create more meaningful play than other games: the design of some games generates truly meaningful experiences for players, whereas other, less successful game designs result in experiences that somehow fall short. Even if meaningful play is a goal that we strive to achieve in our games, sometimes we don't quite get it right. So, in addition to our descriptive understanding of meaningful play, which describes what happens in all games, we need something that will help us be more selective in determining when meaningful play occurs.

This is the second sense of meaningful play. Instead of being a description of the way games operate, it refers to the goal of successful game design. This sense of meaningful play is *evaluative:* it helps us critically evaluate the relationships between actions and outcomes, and decide whether they are meaningful enough within the designed system of the game:

***Meaningful play* occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both *discernable* and *integrated* into the larger context of the game. Creating meaningful play is the goal of successful game design.**

The word "meaningful" in this sense is less about the semiotic construction of meaning (how meaning is made) and more about the emotional and psychological experience of inhabiting a well-designed system of play. In order to understand why some play in games is more meaningful than others, we need to understand the key terms in the definition: *discernable* and *integrated.*

Discernable

Discernable means that the result of the game action is communicated to the player in a perceivable way. In the following excerpt from *Game Design: Theory and Practice,* Richard Rouse III points out the importance of displaying discernable information to the player within the context of the game world. His example looks explicitly at computer games where there is an obvious need to condense massive amounts of data into a representative form that can be clearly communicated to the player. However, the idea of discernable outcomes applies to all games, digital or otherwise. Rouse writes,

> Consider a strategy game in which the player has a number of units scattered all over a large map. The map is so large that only a small portion of it can fit on the screen at once. If a group of the

> player's units happen to be off-screen and are attacked but the player is not made aware of it by the game, the player will become irritated. Consider an RPG where each member of the player's party needs to be fed regularly, but the game does not provide any clear way of communicating how hungry his characters are. Then, if one of the party members suddenly keels over from starvation, the player will become frustrated, and rightly so. Why should the player have to guess at such game-critical information?[2]

If you shoot an asteroid while playing a computer game and the asteroid does not change in any way, you are not going to know if you actually hit it or not. If you do not receive feedback that indicates you are on the right track, the action you took will have very little meaning. On the other hand, if you shoot an asteroid and you hear the sound of impact, or the asteroid shudders violently, or it explodes (or all three!) then the game has effectively communicated the outcome of your action. Similarly, if you move a board game piece on the board but you have absolutely no idea whether your move was good or bad or if it brought you closer to or farther away from winning—in short, if you don't know the meaning of your action—then the result of your action was not discernable. Each of these examples makes clear that when the relationship between an action and the result of that action is not discernable, meaningful play is difficult or impossible to achieve.

Discernability in a game lets the players know *what* happened when they took an action. Without discernability, the player might as well be randomly pressing buttons or throwing down cards. *With* discernability, a game possesses the building blocks of meaningful play.

Integrated

Another component of meaningful play requires that the relationship between action and outcome is *integrated* into the larger context of the game. This means that an action a player takes not only has immediate significance in the game, but also affects the play experience at a later point in the game. Chess is a deep and meaningful game because the delicate opening moves directly result in the complex trajectories of the middle game—and the middle game grows into the spare and powerful encounters of the end game. Any action taken at one moment will affect possible actions at later moments.

Imagine a multi-event athletic game, such as the Decathlon. At the start of the game, the players run a footrace. What if the rules of the game dictated that winning the footrace had nothing to do with the larger game? Imagine what would happen: the players would walk the race as slowly as possible, trying to conserve energy for the other, more meaningful events. Why should they do anything else? Although one of them will win the footrace, it will have no bearing on the larger game. On the other hand, if the players receive points depending on how well they rank and these points become part of a cumulative score, then the actions and the outcomes of the footrace are well integrated into the game as a whole.

Whereas discernability of game events tells players *what* happened *(I hit the monster)*, integration lets players know *how* it will affect the rest of the game *(If I keep on hitting the monster I will kill it. If I kill enough monsters, I'll gain a level.)*. Every action a player takes is woven into the larger fabric of the overall game experience: this is how the play of a game becomes truly meaningful.

Meaningful play can be realized in a number of ways, depending on the design of a particular game. There is no single formula that works in every case. In the example of the asteroid shooting game, immediate and visceral feedback was needed to make the action discernable. But it might also be the case that in a story-based game, the results of an action taken near the beginning of the game are only understood fully at the very end, when the implications are played out in a very unexpected and dramatic way. Both instances require different approaches to designing meaningful play.

Meaningful play engages several aspects of a game simultaneously, giving rise to layers of meaning that accumulate and shape player experience. Meaningful play can occur on the formal, mathematically strategic level of a single move in Chess. It can occur on a social level, as two players use the game as a forum for meaningful communication. And it can occur on larger stages of culture as well, where championship Chess matches can be used as occasions for Cold War political propaganda, or in contemporary philosophical debates about the relative powers of the human mind and artificial intelligence.

The next three chapters elaborate on the many ways that game designers construct spaces of meaningful play for players. Among the many topics we might select, we cover three core concepts that form several of the fundamental building blocks of game design: *design, systems,* and *interactivity.*

Notes

1. Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 446.
2. Richard Rouse III, *Game Design: Theory and Practice* (Plano, TX: Wordware Publishing, 2001), p. 141.

Meaningful Play SUMMARY

- Meaning, play, and games are intimately related concepts. The goal of successful game design is **meaningful play.**
- There are two ways to define meaningful play: **descriptive** and **evaluative.** The descriptive definition addresses the mechanism by which all games create meaning through play. The evaluative definition helps us understand why some games provide more meaningful play than others.
- The **descriptive** definition of meaningful play: **Meaningful play** in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The *meaning* of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome.
- The **evaluative** definition of meaningful play: **Meaningful play** is what occurs when the relationships between actions and outcomes in a game are both ***discernable*** and **integrated** into the larger context of the game.
- **Discernability** means that a player can perceive the immediate outcome of an action. **Integration** means that the outcome of an action is woven into the game system as a whole.
- The two ways of defining meaningful play are closely related. Designing successful games requires understanding meaningful play in both senses.