

The space to play

Matt Jones

Matt Jones is a designer. From 1997 to 1999, he was creative director for the award-winning BBC News Online. After some time as a consultant at Sapien and KPMG, he returned to the BBC to design BBCi's web search and an ambitious social software service. For the past three years he has been at Nokia, firstly in design research and now as Director of User-Experience Design for Nokia Design Multimedia. In "The space to play" he explores themes from his research at Nokia into the universal human urge to play – and how it relates to the way we design our technology, our environments and our future.

<http://www.blackbeltjones.com/work/>
Matt Jones' blog

At Ars Electronica this year I had the pleasure of listening to John Maeda speak about his explorations of "Simplicity" and how he arrived at the subject. He said that in the days after being granted tenure by MIT, he had been talking with an elderly professorial colleague and asked him what he had been working on. He replied that he had been studying a particular, very specific but fascinating problem in the field of linguistics.

Maeda enquired how long he had been looking into it, and the elderly professor replied "around 40 years". Maeda realized that he needed to find an area of study that would similarly fascinate – that would never fully give up its secrets, but would never stop giving up secrets.

I'm beginning to see what he means – although for me the intellectual cornucopia might be "*Play*".

In my former role in design research at Nokia, we often looked to what anthropologist Donald Brown termed "human universals" – traits or behaviors seen in all human cultures, for instance, marriage, turn-taking, magic, etc. (the list runs to about 400 concepts). One of the concepts is not only a human universal, but a mammalian universal – play.

<http://condor.depaul.edu/~mfiddler/hyphen/humunivers.htm>
Human universals

Play, like Maeda's chosen area of simplicity, is hard to pin down, but the chase reveals much. Play is how – and moreover, I would argue, *why* – we learn, explore, interact with each other, understand each other and develop together. Play is widely dismissed in many "developed" cultures as a childish thing, but think of its dominance of our metaphors. Whether it is love, politics, business, war – we look to the language of play.

This quote from Diane Ackerman encompasses what makes play so fascinating, I feel:

"Play is an activity enjoyed for its own sake. It is our brain's favorite way of learning and maneuvering. Because we think of play as the opposite of seriousness, we don't notice that it governs most of society... even in its least intoxicating forms, play feels satisfying, absorbing and has rules and a life of its own, while offering rare challenges. It is organic to who and what we are, a process as instinctive as breathing. Much of human life unfolds as play."

Through weak signals found by our trends research group we had a hunch that "play" as a force in the world was becoming stronger, so we got the go-ahead for a research and design conception project that was to absorb me for most of 2004.

The "Play project", as it was unimaginatively titled, was worked on by a small multi-disciplinary team, which is our default way of working – myself, a technical consultant, Janne Jalkanen and a business consultant, Minh Tran. Our ranks were swelled by academics, independent experts, researchers and designers throughout the span of the project.

One of the main components was research carried out with behavioral trend experts, Sense Worldwide. In this collaboration we identified areas of the ever-present driver of play in global culture.

Examples included "Hacker Play" – the commoditization of technology, transforming it from the stuff of an elite priesthood to the creative raw material of circuit-benders, artists and activists. "Just-in-time Situationists" looked at how people were using mobile telecommunications to "reprogram" the space around them for entertainment, political statement or just-because-they-can absurdist excitement as the Situationists had held they might – to turn tube trains into gigs, or railway stations into pillow fights.

Another of the trends identified in the report was that of "Truly playful spaces" – a trend away from carefully-designed spaces that aim to give everyone the same experience – no matter how rich or rewarding – towards those that enable more spontaneous, unplanned and un-authored occurrences. For instance, take two artists' different responses to the huge turbine hall of Tate Modern, and the different responses of the audience.

Take Olafur Eliasson's "Weather Project" and Carsten Höller's slides. Visitors to the Weather Project marveled at the spectacle of the giant primeval sun that Eliasson had constructed but soon started to play with the experience, lying down on the gently sloping floor of the turbine hall and making reflected shapes in the mirrored ceiling the artist had used to create the illusion. Höller's slides might seem the more playful project at face value, and they have created a similar popular sensation, but the thrills supplied require more constraining demands – protective clothing, strict queuing systems and even a legal release form... Which is the truly playful use of the space?

What does this have to do with interaction design or mobile devices? Well, as I've said, in play we explore, try new things and push our limits more than in any other state. The practice of experience design often tries to prescribe set paths for the

end-user of the device, rather than allow the frustrations of a free exploration of the system. What would it mean to create truly playful space in our systems, services and devices? To create digital weather projects, not just thrilling but constrained slides?

Let's be clear, the tenets of user-centered design and usability engineering are essential to the creation of simple, elegant and non-frustrating systems. But what about going beyond that? Beyond providing just the commodity and stability, and creating the third and most affecting of Vitruvius' precepts: delight.

Of course, one branch of digital experience design has been pursuing this since its earliest days – the games industry. Recent pinnacles of game design such as *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Zelda*, and the *Grand Theft Auto* games allow as much delight to come from free exploration of a consistent and playful world as the excitement of pursuing the narrative of the central, driving gameplay goals.

The game designers generally inject far less random risk in the areas of free exploration than those in the main thread of the competitive game. Less harm can come to you in the "playground" areas, so they encourage experimentation. This is a principle we could import into less entertaining interactive systems almost wholesale: sandboxes where you can experiment without harm coming to your data or progress in the system.

There are also more esoteric, almost non-games in the ascendant, such as the astonishing *Electroplankton*, which are all play and no goal.

<http://electroplankton.nintendods.com/flash.html>
Electroplankton

Games researcher Barbara Lippe says on this trend:

"Newer Japanese games like Electroplankton or Nintendogs are games that do not force the player to be competitive. They are open-ended, playful interactions. They are not inherently thrilling – they can even be relaxing. Non-competitive video games are a novelty in the West and I think many players are becoming tired of the rigid notion of direct competition, high-scores and zero-sum losers."

Whether thrilling or relaxing, one thing that games designers can teach those wrestling with other more general forms of interaction design is a mastery of "flow". Identified by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow in human experience *"is a mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterized by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity"* (to use the wikipedia definition).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mihaly_Csikszentmihalyi
Flow

Flow and play are inextricable – Csikszentmihalyi refers to the "playground" environment necessary to attain a flow state, and the balance of challenge and ability that governs the flow state is essential to the sustenance of good play.

"Playgrounds" led me to another trend from the research that fascinated me: "Re-imagining the urban". We are becoming an urban species; the UN predicts that by mid-2007, and for the first time in history, the majority of humankind will live in cities. Growing up "urban" means that cities are our nature, not just in terms of the real environment, but also our imaginary habitat, our playground.

One striking response to this has been the growth of pursuits such as free running or Parkour. Again, in this quote from a "traceur", or practitioner of Parkour, we see the braid of play, flow and environment:

"The most important element is the harmony between you and the obstacle; the movement has to be elegant ... If you manage to pass over the fence elegantly – that's beautiful, rather than saying 'I jumped the lot.' What's the point in that?"

Replace "obstacle" with task or goal and we can start to imagine a different take on taut usability and interface design, leaving space for the user to bring finesse and delight to the experience through play. Think of the encouragement of trial, exploration, and learning that the deft injection of playful elements could bring to the systems we design.

This all sounds very rosy, but the driving force we supposed was behind the rise of play in societies is a flip-side response to what Ulrich Beck termed "The Risk Society" – the equally rising forces of conservatism in the face of global uncertainties such as environmental disaster, terrorism and globalization.

To play in the face of such seemingly insurmountable uncertainty seems childish and trivial perhaps, but the potential, adaptation and flexibility that it affords will give us much better chances of survival than "strict adult" conservatism. What better response to the challenges of humanity in the 21st century than that earliest and most universal of human and mammalian instincts – to play.

This article was written for *receiver*
Contact: matt@blackbeltjones.com