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The Anarchy of Paidia

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(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/grahamtobinchildren_at_playcompressed_2.jpg

do games begin? In the anarchy of paidia, we play without rules and without limits. It is amusing, creative and chaotic, but it is also short lived, as when the natural play of a toy becomes formalised, it becomes a game. Children find paidia in every corner of their lives, while adults may struggle to ever make it back to a place where they will permit themselves the freedom to play. But if we can construct games that harness paidia, we might become able to make games for a wider audience than we ever thought possible.

In 1958, the eclectic intellectual Roger Caillois identified four patterns of play - Agon (competition), Alea (chance), Mimicry (simulation), and Ilinx (vertigo). Caillois was aware that these patterns did not cover the entire spectrum of play, but was working towards a sociological model, relating these games to the way societies are organised. Caillois' model for play also includes an axis of distinction, between the formal, rule-focused state of ludus and the anarchic state of spontaneous play he refers to as paidia. He describes paidia as follows:

[Games] can also be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrollable fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complimentary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature... I call this second component ludus.

(I conjugate 'ludus' to the adjective 'ludic', and 'paidia' to the adjective 'paidic'; I believe language is flexible enough to absorb my reckless conjugations.)

I have accused game designers of being remiss in overlooking the value of alea (games of chance) but we are, on the whole, prone to overlook paidia completely. This is not surprising: the game designer's craft is generally about producing the framework of play, which is to say the rules and abstractions that define the game world and its gameplay. In essence, the game designer works in the field of ludus, and this application of ludic elements is a contrary state of affairs to paidia.



(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/sand_play_1_2.jpg) One can see paidia most clearly when a group of children enter a garden, or a playground, or any similar place. In fact, for a child who is young enough, we see paidia wherever they are placed - although if parents and friends have not been careful in 'childproofing', tears may result. It begins with exploration, the examination of everything that the play space contains. The components of the play space can include physical objects (a ball, a stick, a daisy), physical spaces (an open field, a long path), logical spaces (the lines drawn out for a sporting match, for instance) and other people (typically a child's peer group). Different children will approach these potential toys in different ways.

In some respects, this moment is the purest expression of paidia, since the instant a course of action evolves, ludus begins to express itself. Indeed, play is arguably always on a journey from paidia to ludus, although it would be wrong to think that it cannot also travel back towards paidia - as when a group discard a tedious boardgame rule because it doesn't suit the way they want to play.

What may happen in our hypothetical playground? A child picks up the stick. It has heft and weight. They may begin to hit things with it (a form of ilinx), or they may see it as a sword and begin to act out a little fantasy (a form of mimicry). A daisy may invite a child to pull off its petals, one by one - perhaps chanting "he loves me, he loves me not" or some similar rhyme (a form of alea). A child in an open field may be filled with a spontaneous desire to run (especially downhill!), which might evolve into a form of agon if other children decide to join in with her running, or they may use the space to spin around rapidly (invoking ilinx). Lines on the ground may invite a child to try and walk and balance along them, or suggest simple games.

Some activities will prove more fun than others. Hitting objects with a stick is more fun if everyone around you is laughing about it, for instance. The infinite possibilities of paidia become mediated by the pragmatics of interaction. If the same group regularly return to the same playground, patterns of play will develop... expressions of ludus will gradually mediate the initial anarchy. Indeed, if the children have already learned simple games, they may turn straight to these ludic patterns (depending, of course, on their personality, mood and inclinations).

Pure paidia, then, is short lived - but the impulse for paidia can exert itself at all scales of ludus. Whenever we are given a set of rules for play, it can be fun to explore what happens when those rules are bent, overlooked, or replaced, although the group must be willing. The more that a form of play is repeated, the more likely it is to become more formally expressed - this is the journey from paidia towards ludic play - but paidia can re-exert itself as a temporary escape from the rules at any time.

(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/_38828143_argument_getty300_1.jpg)The journey from paidia to ludus arguably culminates in sports - which are ludic patterns so formalised that there are



professionals hired to enforce the rules (referees). Sports are so formal that they contain rituals such as anthem singing, coin tossing, employment drafts and so forth which have insinuated themselves into their ludic and social structure. As rituals that divert tribal conflict impulses into harmless agon, they are of enormous social significance.

Hobbygames can be more complex ludic structures than sports, but their cultural effects are limited because their appeal is constrained to those with a love of intricacy (in

Temperament Theory, only those expressing the Rational pattern to some degree can deal with their complexity).

Another key distinction here is that hobbygames are designed, whereas sports evolve from organic paidia. This in part explains why sports can have such esoteric rules. I love American football, but it's rules are the epitome of arcana, and the Offside rule in football (soccer to some) is famously obscure.

Raph Koster expressed his view that paidia activities generally have more rules not less (<http://www.raphkoster.com/?p=116>):

Paidia generally “imports” rulesets derived from a vast array of cultural assumptions, whereas ludus games are ones that have been tightly defined down (and which nonetheless have an assortment of rules that are implied but not stated that are part of the cultural practice of game playing). A game of freeform roleplay (a paidia-mimicry game) is, to my mind, an incredibly difficult challenge involving the learning of and successful navigation of an *enormous* variety of rules that are no less strict for being unspoken. Often, it's a process of defining the rules *in accordance with cultural assumptions* as you go... Our lives are constantly circumscribed by rules; paidia games are about learning what they are and modeling them.

I freely accept that for introverted people, the extroverted play of freeform roleplay can be a difficult social challenge. It is an example of how real world role-playing games help people develop their social skills (which supports Raph's view of games as learning mechanisms). However, the social rules Raph refers to still apply in ludic tabletop role-playing games: the freeform game is simply a small step back towards paidia.

The notion of social rules is an important topic in sociological fields such as social constructionism. But on examination these 'rules' are not necessarily ludic structures but rather patterns of distinction between what is *normal* or acceptable behaviour and what is abnormal or unacceptable. Few game rules take this form. Although I concur that we can model society as a game, I do not share Raph's view that paidia games are principally about learning or modeling social rules.

(<https://onlyagame.typepad.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/sink.jpg>)For instance, one of my favourite paidia games is Sink

(<http://www.sensibilium.com/writings/misc.php?page=24>), immortalised in the pages of the *Principia Discordia*. This is a natural play activity which is enjoyed by children (and child-like adults) anywhere there is a large body of water: you throw something that floats into the water, then you attempt to sink it by throwing other stuff at it. Highly



recommended! Children do not need to be taught the game, and the game has nothing to do with society, rather the play is the *implicit* consequence of its elements: a body of water, something that floats, and stones. This is the essence of pure paidia to my mind.

Another paidic activity I enjoy (and have mentioned here before) is making dams out of sand; once again, the play emerges naturally as an implicit consequence of the components of play - in this case, a stream and sand or mud. I am considering in the future hosting a game designer's retreat based on paidic beach activities: dams, sink and watching sandcastles destroyed by the encroaching tide. (I'm still looking for the right venue, and I have no idea who would be interested in participating. Still, even if its just myself and Corvus, I know we'll have fun).

Paidia need not be the provision of children - but when do adults permit themselves the freedom to engage in unadulterated play? I conjecture they do so when they feel safe. This is not only in the sense of physical safety (the absence of risk of injury) but also of psychological safety (the absence of risk of frustration or embarrassment, for instance). Some adults rarely if ever permit themselves such luxuries, but most can be coaxed.

I notice that those with a technical bent indulge in paidia when they get a new gadget. Although a small few will read manuals first, many will launch themselves into experimentation: what does this do? I wonder what happens if I do this? Is there a way I can do this? This is a form of paidia, at least until the structure of the device's interface or controls become apparent - until they learn to play the gadget's game.

The same thing happens when a player sits down at a videogame for the first time - but again, only if they feel safe to experiment. This safety can come from game literacy (experience with games), or from a friend or relative standing by to provide advice and support, or just from personal self confidence. Any budding game designer should spend the time to see people with very little videogame experience tackle a game for the first time. When a player begins to play, they commence with the paidia that evolves naturally from experimentation.

At GDC 2005, Ramon Romero of Microsoft's Games User Research showed footage of various random people playing games for the first time. I was particular touched by the middle aged man who drove around in *Midtown Madness* as if he was playing a driving simulator. "This is a great game," he said, as he stopped at a red light and waited for it to change. He had not interpreted the game world as a place exclusively for agon, but had instead automatically tended towards mimicry. What a shame that this particular game did not support this mode of play!

In our hypothetical playground, the children develop from pure paidia to some ludic elements in an organic fashion. In a game world, the transition from paidia to ludus is mediated by the game design. The player finds their avatar in a area with certain elements. The player experiments. If they are highly game literate, they may immediately know what to do, because most games are highly derivative of one another, but as a general case this is unusual.

Suppose the player comes across a ball as the first thing they find in the game world. They want to pick it up and throw it. But how do they do this? They experiment. They push buttons at random and see what happens. If the game is effective at supporting paidia, fun things will happen - they may or may not end up throwing the ball, depending upon the design of the game. They might find that one button causes them to roll on the ground, and this might be entertaining in itself. If throwing the ball is an easy action to deduce, they will eventually do it. If not, they may conclude that it cannot be done. Gradually, the player learns the game rules: ludus is enforced upon them. If throwing the ball is essential to progress, the player may have to be taught to throw it. The necessity of learning is a consequence of enforced ludus in this instance; in the real world, working out how to throw the ball would not be a factor - you'd just do it.

It follows, therefore, that to support paidia we need to encourage and allow for the player's capacity to experiment freely, and assist the player to express the most obvious implied actions for each game element. This is an unusual situation - a video game requires formal rules or procedures to exist, but if we want the player to play freely, we need to construct

these rules in a form that supports self-expression (or the illusion of self-expression, created by anticipating the most likely free choices and implementing them). There are two principle ways I believe this can be achieved: simplicity and exhaustive attention to detail.



(<https://onlyagame.typepad.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/katamari.jpg>) If the game is simple enough in its conception that free play is automatically supported, which arguably happens with *Katamari Damacy*, a form of paidia results. There is nothing especially complex to learn, so the player has the freedom to play (at least until the goal-orientation of the games' structure imposes). *Lego Star Wars* benefits similarly from its simplicity (it had to be simple if a parent and child were to play together; most parents are rubbish at games). The player does not actually have the freedom to do whatever they want, but rather the natural tendencies suggested by the game elements encourages the player to act in a manner consistent with the intended play. Both games are considerably more paidic than we have come to expect from the current games industry.

Alternatively, the makers of the game can invest the time and money to add additional play elements wherever they naturally occur. Part of the success of the recent *Grand Theft Auto* games is that attention has been paid to supporting the natural paidia of the environment. A taxi suggests the mimicry of being a taxi driver - so this behaviour is added. Bystanders and weapons suggest murderous carnage - and behaviour is added to the game to support this form of paidia (only suitable in a game!). Sadly, a great deal has been added with excessive emphasis on ludic fiero, so the appeal still has its limits, but nonetheless, the playground world that the team builds with each successive GTA iteration supports more and more paidia - more and more free play. This approach is devastatingly expensive, however.

There is nothing wrong with highly ludic games, and these will always have an audience, but if we truly wish to aspire to the mass market audience that upper market budgets imply we need to spend more design and implementation time focusing on the issues of minimising how much the player *must* learn and maximising how much the player can simply *play*. This involves simplifying the interface as much as is humanly possible and (possibly) the addition of intelligently organised context-sensitive elements. It may also involve adding behaviour to the game elements to support any obviously implied play actions - thus transforming the game world into a play world.

This latter process is not principally a (strategic) game design problem, but a (tactical) game tweaking problem ideally requiring observation of new players with the game (what we call blind testing). If you have ever wondered why certain hallowed game developers no longer seem as good as they once were, I suspect it is because they no longer have the money to pay for the expensive back end of the project - that process of tweaking which brings out the play world, and thus expands the appeal of the game beyond those with a taste for the ludic. Rockstar North has the money to do this (but strangely only do it with GTA games). Most companies can't afford it.

This is our dirty little secret that we're slightly reluctant to own up to: to make mass market games is expensive because it takes a lot of time and effort to tweak them sufficiently for Casual players to be able to enjoy the game. The Hardcore tolerate the rough edges, because they have the game literacy to push through it, and the games are more frequently designed to meet their play needs, while Casual players will stop playing when they cannot work out what is expected of

them. The most important property a game developer can possess if they want to succeed in the upper market is good workflow. Good workflow means you can make changes faster, which means you can smooth the rough edges and enhance the inherent play of the game. Good game design is an asset to any project, but it is no substitute for good workflow because even the best game designer in the world does not wholly anticipate how all aspects of the game will work in practice.

Paidia, then, is the anarchic nebula from which all play originates. Paidia (for most players) is fun - it's the very definition of fun - but it is a short lived kind of fun... it is exuberant amusement, but it eventually gives way to ludus and to other kinds of fun. We need to recognise the sheer number of people who lack any kind of game literacy and for whom picking up a new game is not fun but instead is a baffling ordeal. I do not believe that video games are only for a certain type of person - I believe we can make video games for any and all people. But to do so we need to learn new skills... we need to learn how to support spontaneous play, to discover how to construct game worlds as play worlds, and to present the game so that the player's transition into ludus can be a journey *from* paidia, and not merely the process of patiently learning the ludic elements of the game.

Let us play...

The opening photo is Children at Play by Graham Tobin; the katamari sketch is by Rakugaki Scribble Works; as ever, no copyright infringement is intended, and I will take any image down if asked.

Posted on December 23, 2005 at 08:52 AM in Game Design


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(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1/comments/atom.xml) for this post.

Excellent article! I do believe, however, videogames more focused on paidia are becoming more popular (just look at Nintendogs, Animal Crossing, Elektroplankton or even The Sims).

I run the website nongames.com, dealing with game design theory and focused on those games that are usually much more about 'paidia' than 'ludus'. I have also finished a MA project about the same subjects. Please, feel free to visit the site anytime - maybe you will like it.

Posted by: Chico Queiroz (<http://www.nongames.com>) | December 23, 2005 at 02:18 PM

(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12303000#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349bd6bb69e2)

What I mean by adaptive content/gameplay is "the addition of intelligently organised context-sensitive elements." With an AI platform capable of dynamic content creation a designer would have to take their design to a whole new level, no longer designing ludic rule sets they would have to devise meta-rules which creates the singular nucleus of paidia. This would complete the circle from basic mechanic paidia to heavily ludic intensive play, back again to the paidia of newly evolved/recombined rule set. The paidic nucleus would be designer in terms of heuristics rather than hard-coded rules,

though there would need to be a development environment comprised of a meta-grammar, a language of languages, in which codified heuristics could be implemented and functionally interpreted by the drama management AI. The DMAI could also, provided it had a legend of meaningful connections related to the meta-rules, tweak the gameplay in real-time, that is as specific rule-set/content pairings are presented, greatly culling back-end costs. In the meantime, we'll have to resort to cleverness and paidia which doesn't coalesce into narratively or otherwise ludically interesting focuses.

Posted by: Patrick (<https://www.kingludic.blogspot.com>) | December 23, 2005 at 05:06 PM
(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12306868#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349be77169e2)

Hmm, I think your example of sinking a floating object is actually very very ludic. It has very tightly constrained rules, a clear objective, and it's a cooperative game. Why do you feel it is an example of paidia?

I also didn't mean to imply that all paidia play is about social rules; sandcastles are about physics, for example. It's still an importation of rulesets from the world, whereas ludic games are strongly characterized by a tightly bounded magic circle, and highly "modeled" rules that are not literally those of the real world but simulations of some aspect thereof.

Many of the examples of games that offer more paidia are in fact examples of ludic games (such as GTA or Halo) which import more and more broad "rulesets" from the real world (such as physics).

Posted by: Raph (<http://www.raphkoster.com>) | December 23, 2005 at 11:22 PM
(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12316195#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349bed5b69e2)

Chico:

I'm absolutely thrilled to learn about your site! I will get a link up as soon as I get a chance.

Incidentally, the games you mention are all examples of games of Mimicry (one of Caillois' four patterns of cross cultural play). I'll be posting on this soon.

Patrick:

I really like the way you're trying to take your (future) games - although your descriptions of your intentions become quite complex! :)

Raph:

There might be a terminological disconnect between the way you use the term ludic and the way Caillois and I employ it. Ludic rules, in Caillois' eyes, are enforced not implicit. Sink has no such rules. The clearest evidence of this is that it does not need to be taught - it occurs again and again, freely and spontaneously.

I agree with you that paidia can occur in ludic contexts (I thought I expressly said that in the post!) Paidia occurs wherever people have the freedom to play spontaneously, both in and out of ludic contexts.

Thanks for the clarification about the social rules issue - but surely you are mistaken that sandcastles are about physics... aren't they about having fun with sand? :D

Thanks for the comments!

Posted by: Chris (<https://onlyagame.typepad.com>) | December 26, 2005 at 07:44 PM
(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12350873#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d83467052953ef)

To me, having fun with sand is in the end, having fun with the physical properties of sand, which is physics. :)

As far as Caillois' terminology -- as you know, I tend to think that his definitions are fuzzy anyway. To my mind, when you play something like "sink," the rules usually get socially enforced, just as the rules in any other game tend to be.

Just because a given game is "obvious" and tends to reappear, doesn't mean that its rules are implicit. IMHO, of course.

Posted by: Raph (<http://www.raphkoster.com>) | December 26, 2005 at 11:06 PM

(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12353206#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349c7e8569e2)

I understand the relationship between ludes and paidia by this analogy, the laws of physics are implicit, but the formations of crystals, caves and mountains are explicit in and of themselves; in the soup of paidic space many lattices of ludes can emerge. In games this emergence is largely gravitated by volition, where user intentionality takes the role of a figurative "quantum gravity" subtly guiding the formation of concrete structures.

I just read Raph's book and have this to say:

<http://kingludic.blogspot.com/2005/12/theory-of-fun-for-interactive.html>

Posted by: Patrick (<https://www.kingludic.blogspot.com>) | December 30, 2005 at 09:30 PM

(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12440365#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349dbc5a69e2)

Chris: Thanks a lot for the compliments and the link. I do agree that my examples would mostly follow the Mimicry pattern. But I must say that Electroplankton also has a more llinx-like quality: some players often play it in a aleatory, instinctive fashion to be, if you wish, "intoxicated" by the outcome.

I am waiting for your next post. Keep up the good work!

Posted by: Chico Queiroz (<http://www.nongames.com>) | January 03, 2006 at 08:08 PM

(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12523942#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349e55f169e2)

I confess, I haven't seen Electroplankton yet... your description makes it sound fabulous! We haven't had games (or nongames, if you prefer) like this since the days of Jeff Minter.

In the book, and in my lectures, I use the term 'toyplay' to describe non-performance oriented play and 'gameplay' to describe performance oriented play (that is, play with either a goal, or a process metric). I resisted the temptation to use the term in this piece, but I felt it worth mentioning. :)

Posted by: Chris (<https://onlyagame.typepad.com>) | January 04, 2006 at 08:44 AM

(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12547194#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d834690abe53ef)

"Toyplay" is a nice term - I must use it sometime, maybe quoting yours "Story... Narrative... Game... Toy". It's a shame I didn't find your website back when I was still doing my MA... I still have to check out your book too...

Speaking of Jeff Minter, I haven't seen Neon running on the Xbox360, but read some nice reviews on it. Have you tried it?

Posted by: Chico Queiroz (<http://www.nongames.com>) | January 04, 2006 at 12:28 PM
(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12549557#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d834690f6353ef)

Not yet, no, but it's by far the most interesting thing about the 360 for me! :)

Posted by: Chris | January 04, 2006 at 02:44 PM
(https://onlyagame.typepad.com/only_a_game/2005/12/the_anarchy_of__1.html?cid=12552350#comment-6a00d83452030269e200d8349e7fe969e2)


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