

"Discuss the role of Bernie De Koven's Game mind vs the Play mind in game design. Use at least two games as examples."

Bernie De Koven's ingenious work *'The Well-Played Game'* focuses on two mindsets that are important to consider when designing games: "the playing mind" and "the gaming mind". While both have notable differences, they work better together than against each other because, to De Koven, "there is no play vs. games... only the deep mystery of their paradoxical union"¹. To better understand their importance in game design, it is vital to understand them individually and how they work together to show why they serve as "necessary elements of playing well" (Zimmerman, 2013, ix).

To start with, let us look at the game mind. De Koven sees games as performances, works of art that provide players with a common goal. Games like football, table tennis, or tag do not have any bearing on the real world outside the game. Still, they do reflect reality, much like Huizinga's 'Magic Circle' theory², where the game boundaries exist "within which special rules obtain" and allow it to become its own "temporary world" (J. Huizinga, 1949, [1938]). The game mind also takes cues from the MDA³ theory (or *Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics*). If players can understand the game's rules, interact with the game system, and enjoy playing it, it is likely to provoke its intended response, and allow for a well-played game (Hunicke, R, LeBlanc, M, & Zubek, R, 2004).

The game mind is "concentrated, determined, [and] intelligent", focusing on structure and control rather than innovation and freedom. Take football, for instance; there are specific rules that players need to follow with only a few scoring methods available. The sense of achievement with set goals give the player confidence from completing them and a sense of well-being from excelling at something, making it feel good to play. Without structure, there is no sense of progression, "*all release and no control*", making the experience feel worthless and a waste of time. This causes players to "*[lose] all responsibility - to the game, to the community, [and] to [them]selves*" (De Koven, p. 40), resulting in a game that is not being played well at all.

In contrast, the play mind does not focus on structure. Instead, play is the enactment of anything that is not real and not intended to have any consequences, things that can be "innovative, magical, [or] boundless." This mindset allows for a sense of freedom, "a freedom that does more than any game can, a freedom with which we nurture the play community" (De Koven, p. 40, 53). Its primary purpose is for the joy of playing with no goal in mind, which is achieved by changing pre-existing games and taking away the focus of scoring or winning. Perfect examples include fan game challenges like the 'Nuzlocke Challenge' in the *Pokémon series* (Game Freak), the 'No Ring Challenge' in the *Sonic the Hedgehog series* (SEGA), and the challenge to complete *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) with a *Rock Band* (Harmonix) guitar or drum set. When playing well, players are fully engaged and utterly present while still only playing a game, similar to McLuhan's 'Hot and Cold' theory, which is a spectrum of a game's pace⁴. When maintaining a steady pace of low fidelity (cool) and high fidelity (heated) moments, players feel a consistent flow in-game, allowing them to become absorbed into these absurd ways of playing games (McLuhan, 1994).

¹ De Koven, B. (2013). *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

² Huizinga, J. (1949). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

³ Hunicke, R, LeBlanc, M, & Zubek, R, (2004), *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research*. In *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*

⁴ McLuhan, M, (1994), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Additionally, the play mind takes cues from Ian Bogost's idea of 'Procedurality', in which games promote specific ways of understanding the world⁵. (Bogost, 2010). Procedurality allows for particular ways to think of play, enabling unnatural types of play to feel completely natural in the play mind. People can play table tennis to see how long they can keep a rally going, or others could play tic-tac-toe by changing how many turns someone gets without ever needing a win state. If play is not considered, it feels boring to players, not allowing them to express themselves; there is no sense of magic, no innovation, and it makes players feel restrained. When this happens, the game is not fun, symbolising that it is not being played well.

While both the game mind and play mind exhibit different ways of thinking, it is crucial to consider both concepts in game design, as "[o]ne without the other can't produce a well-played game" (Zimmerman, 2013, ix). As De Koven puts it:

"There is a fine balance between play and game, between control and release, lightness and heaviness, concentration and spontaneity. The function of our play community is to maintain that balance, to negotiate between game-as-it-is-being-played and the game-as-we-intend-it-to-be." (De Koven, 2013, 40)

An excellent way to think of this analogy is by looking at 'Garry's Mod' (Facepunch Studios, 2006). "The *game-as-we-intend-it-to-be*" would be the original sandbox mode. Whereas the "*game-as-it-is-being-played*"⁶ (De Koven, 2013, pg. 40) would consist of game modes created by its community like 'Deathrun', 'Trouble in Terrorist Town', and 'Prop Hunt', which significantly change up the gameplay from the intended experience.

Ignoring one of these mindsets makes our experience feel unbalanced. It causes the game not to challenge its players, making it no fun to play anymore. Players could try to restore the game by changing gameplay or stripping its rules with 'well-timed cheats', 'borrowed rules' from other games, and the 'freedom to quit'⁷. De Koven declares, "[i]f making an exception helps us have an exceptional game, anything is all right". Despite this, it is not guaranteed to work every time and can sometimes break the sacredness⁸ of a game (De Koven, pg. 42, 43, 44, 60). Playing a game should merge both the play and game minds to incorporate rules, acting as a script while still maintaining a sense of freedom. When playing well, the player is fully engaged and present while still only playing a game. The well-played game is then an experience that becomes excellent due to the way it is played.

In conclusion, acknowledging the game mind and play mind when designing games is essential for making the experience enjoyable for players, while still allowing them to feel a sense of challenge and excitement. The structured game mind needs to blend well with the creative play mind, not overbearing one over the other; if that happens, the experience will not be enjoyable to play. Ultimately, these two mindsets need to work well together to provide a well-played game to its players, signifying their importance within game design.

⁵ Bogost, I. (2010), *Persuasive Games: The expressive power of videogames*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

^{6,7,8} De Koven, B. (2013). *The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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