



The Practice of Play

How games can deepen curiosity, connection, digital judgment, and everyday skill

Play well. Learn widely.

SHAD EDDIE MONGRUE

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BOOK

The Practice of Play

*How games can deepen curiosity, connection, digital
judgment, and everyday skill*

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Every statistic, study finding and documented example is numbered and listed in the Sources, with a link to the page it came from. Each was checked word for word against its source in October 2026. Stories marked "composite example" are illustrations drawn from common situations; their names and details are not real people. Stories marked "documented example" come from the cited sources.

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An Invitation

Maybe you came to games through a child, a friend, a favorite story, a controller that has been gathering dust, or a curiosity you never quite had time to follow. Maybe you already play and want a clearer sense of what you enjoy and how to make room for it. Wherever you begin, you do not need to prove that games are useful before you are allowed to love them. Delight is a good reason to pay attention. So are curiosity, company, and the pleasure of getting a little better at something.

Games belong in grown-up life because grown-ups still learn, imagine, compete, cooperate, and need ways to spend time together. Play is not a secret shortcut to wisdom, and it does not have to become a job to count. It can be a story you explore, a puzzle you worry at, a team effort that works only when everyone listens, or a small ritual that gives an ordinary evening a shape. The point is not to make every hour productive. It is to notice what play makes possible, and choose it with your eyes open.

You would not be an odd exception for taking games seriously as part of ordinary life. Nearly two-thirds of Americans ages 5 to 90—205.1 million people—regularly play video games¹. That reach does not prove that every game is worthwhile or that every player has the same experience. It does tell us that games are a familiar part of the culture many of us share, even when we play in different ways or not at all.

Some of that shared life happens in communities. Video game communities include 27% of adults under 30, 16% of adults in their 30s and 40s, and 4% of adults 50 and older². A game can offer a reason to talk, make something together, or meet people around a common interest. It can also bring friction, exclusion, or unwanted contact. The hopeful approach is not to assume the best or the worst, but to learn how to participate thoughtfully and seek spaces that fit your interests and boundaries.

There are also reasons to be careful about grand claims. A review of gamification in education found a positive influence on student motivation, while noting that motivation can decline over time³. That is a useful reminder: a feature that feels exciting at first may not keep its appeal, and a game's design does not guarantee a particular result. This book treats

evidence as a guide, not a promise. It makes room for the benefits people may find in play without pretending that all games, players, or circumstances are alike.

The invitation is simple: bring your curiosity, and let your judgment come along too. Learn to read a game's systems, practice one skill at a time, and notice what makes a session satisfying—or not. Share play when it feels good, protect your information, and step away when life calls. Gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who engage in gaming, according to WHO⁴; that is a reason not to treat ordinary play as a problem, while still paying attention to whether gaming is crowding out daily life. You are allowed to enjoy games without turning them into a cure, a competition, or a test of character.

Reasons to fall in love with this subject

- **Because curiosity gets to lead** A game gives you a world with things to notice: a route that might work, a rule you have not understood yet, a character whose motives remain uncertain. You can explore without needing to know the answer in advance. Sometimes the reward is progress; sometimes it is the pleasure of seeing a familiar situation differently. Curiosity does not require you to finish every game or solve every mystery. It only asks you to stay interested long enough to look closer.
- **Because challenge can invite practice** A satisfying challenge asks something of you without making you feel that every mistake is a verdict. You can try a move, see what happened, and adjust. That pattern can make practice feel lively rather than dutiful. It does not mean that difficulty is always enjoyable, or that playing longer automatically makes you better. You can choose a small goal, focus on one skill, and decide whether the effort is still worth the fun. Sometimes the wise move is to change games—or take a break.
- **Because people can make things together** Multiplayer play can turn separate decisions into shared effort. One person spots a route; another keeps the team steady; someone else makes the timely call. The value is not limited to winning. A research review describes Foldit as a multiplayer game that enlisted players worldwide to work on protein-structure problems, and identifies their contribution as an example of games channeling human intuition toward a scientific challenge⁵. That is an

unusual case, not a promise about every game—but it shows how play can make cooperation tangible.

- **Because a game can be a system to understand** Learning how a game works is its own small pleasure. You can read a map, test a control, watch how feedback changes after a choice, and replace guesswork with a better question. The same habit—pause, observe, test—can make confusing interfaces feel less mysterious. You do not need to master every mechanic. The aim is to notice what the game is asking, what information it gives you, and where your assumptions may be getting in the way.
- **Because play has room for different people** There is no single correct way to be a player. Some people want quiet solo exploration; others prefer a cooperative group or a lively competition. Accessibility settings can also change what is possible and comfortable. In a survey of 154 players with disabilities, respondents reported using assistive technologies and options such as key remapping and subtitles⁶. That finding does not represent every disabled player, but it reminds us to look for options, listen to individual needs, and avoid treating any group as if everyone shares one experience.
- **Because enjoyment and judgment can share a seat** You can love the color and craft of a game while asking sensible questions about its messages, privacy settings, spending prompts, and social spaces. Careful judgment is not the enemy of fun; it helps you decide what deserves your attention and what does not. A suspicious link can be ignored. A community can be muted or left. A session can end when you have had enough. You do not need to choose between being an enthusiastic player and a thoughtful digital citizen.

BY THE END OF THIS BOOK, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO

- Explain why games can matter as culture, company, challenge, and play without claiming they benefit everyone in the same way.
- Notice which goals, feedback, discoveries, and levels of challenge make a particular game enjoyable for you.
- Read rules, tutorials, interfaces, maps, and feedback to understand a game before relying on guesswork.
- Set a small practice goal, focus on one skill, review what happened, and adjust without assuming more hours always mean more progress.
- Communicate, cooperate, handle disagreement, and choose multiplayer communities that fit your interests and boundaries.
- Evaluate game-related links, claims, messages, and requests with curiosity and healthy skepticism.
- Look for accessibility options and barriers while recognizing that players' needs and preferences differ.
- Use practical safeguards for privacy and account security, notice when play is displacing daily life, and make a personal plan for stepping away.

How to use this book

You can read this book from beginning to end, or start with the question that brought you here. If you are new to games, the chapters on reading systems and choosing a challenge offer a gentle way in. If you already play, you may want to begin with practice, multiplayer habits, accessibility, or digital safety. The chapters are connected, but you do not need to pass a test before moving on.

Treat the suggestions as experiments, not rules. Try a small goal in a game you already know; notice what you enjoy, what frustrates you, and what changes when you adjust one approach. Keep what helps and leave what does not. If a game stops being enjoyable, you are allowed to change the plan, switch games, or stop playing. No achievement screen gets to decide what counts as a good use of your time.

If you read with a child, friend, or gaming group, use the questions as conversation starters rather than lectures. Talk about what feels welcoming, what information should stay private, and how to handle a difficult interaction. You do not have to agree on every game to learn from one another. The goal is a more capable, considerate way to take part in digital life.

HOW THIS BOOK HANDLES EVIDENCE

This book distinguishes documented findings from illustrative composites and does not invent personal anecdotes or present fictional situations as research. Numbered citations point to the supplied sources; claims are kept within what those sources support, and findings with limits or mixed implications are described cautiously. Evidence about learning, motivation, health, and social life does not guarantee an outcome for an individual. The book is educational, not personal professional advice; for health or other individual concerns, seek guidance suited to your circumstances.

Why Play Belongs in Grown-Up Life

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

Mara has promised herself she'll spend the evening catching up on errands. Then a friend sends a link to a cooperative puzzle game. "Just one round," she says, opening it on her laptop.

The game gives the two of them a map, a few clues, and a problem they can't solve by rushing. Mara notices a pattern her friend missed. Her friend spots a detail in the instructions that changes their plan. They disagree, try one approach, back up, and try another. When the puzzle finally clicks, they celebrate as if they've just pulled off a small heist—though the only thing stolen is an hour from the laundry pile.

That hour is not automatically noble or useful. Mara could have spent it in a way she regretted, and she could also have spent it in a way that was more restorative. But the game gave her a reason to pay attention, a shared problem to work on, and a pleasant conversation with someone she likes. Those are real parts of an ordinary life, not prizes reserved for children or professional players. Play can be simply enjoyable. It can also be a place to practice curiosity, patience, and connection—without pretending every round is a lesson.

Play is a human-sized part of culture

Games are sometimes treated as a special-interest corner of life: fine for children, perhaps, or for people hoping to turn a hobby into a job. But play is also one way people make and share culture. A game has rules, images, sounds, stories, jokes, habits, and ways of treating other people. Players bring their own interpretations to it. Even a simple game can become a setting for conversation: you compare strategies, remember a surprising moment, or explain why a certain kind of challenge is satisfying.

The scale of participation makes games hard to dismiss as a fringe pastime. The Entertainment Software Association reported that nearly two-thirds of Americans ages 5 to 90—205.1 million people—regularly play video games¹. That figure does not tell us what each person plays, how often, or what they get from it. It does make one thing plain: games are part of everyday life for a large and varied public.

You don't need to know industry history, own the newest device, or be good at a game to take part in this culture. You can enjoy watching someone play, ask what they like about a game, or try a short session yourself. You can also decide a particular game isn't for you. Being open to play doesn't require turning every spare moment into screen time. It means recognizing that games can be a legitimate form of leisure, expression, and shared attention.

Joy is a reason, not a sales pitch

Joy can sound like a small argument for games. It isn't. Much of adult life is organized around outcomes: finish the task, solve the problem, make the plan work. Games can offer a different kind of attention. You follow a rule because it creates an interesting puzzle. You try again because the attempt itself is absorbing. You laugh at a ridiculous outcome that would be frustrating in a more serious setting. Nothing needs to be converted into a certificate or a career plan for the experience to count.

That said, the fact that play can feel good does not mean it is always good for you in every amount or circumstance. A game may be relaxing one evening and irritating the next. A competitive match may bring energy, or it may leave you tense. A group may feel welcoming, or it may not suit your communication style. You can notice these differences without declaring games either wonderful or harmful as a whole.

A useful question is not simply, "Is gaming good?" It is, "What is this particular game doing in my life right now?" Maybe you enjoy solving a problem with a friend. Maybe you like the quiet concentration of a solo game. Maybe the game's demands are more tiring than fun today. Paying attention to your own experience gives you a better guide than sweeping claims about what all games supposedly do.

Connection can happen on the other side of a screen

A game can give people a shared activity when they are not in the same room. Online communities can gather around a game, an interest, or a style of play. Pew Research Center reported that video-game communities include 27% of adults under 30, 16% of adults in their 30s and 40s, and 4% of adults 50 and older². Those differences describe participation, not who is welcome or what any one person's experience will be.

The community around a game can matter as much as the game itself. Some players want a place to trade tips; others want to make things together, follow tournaments, or simply share enthusiasm. In a survey of online communities, 74% of members said they ever post or share in the community they visit most². That does not mean every community is supportive, or that every member wants to be highly active. It shows that many people use these spaces to contribute, not just to watch.

Connection still takes judgment. You can enjoy a community while keeping personal information private, leaving a conversation that turns unpleasant, or choosing a group with clearer boundaries. And online play does not have to replace in-person friendship. A game can be one more way to spend time together, alongside a meal, a walk, or a conversation that has nothing to do with games. The point is not to make every pastime social; it is to recognize that play can create a shared focus.

Take benefits seriously without overclaiming

Games can invite curiosity and shared problem-solving, but saying that is different from claiming every game teaches valuable skills or improves every player. A benefit depends on the activity, the person, and the situation. A game that rewards experimentation may encourage you to test ideas. A cooperative game may give you a reason to coordinate. Neither experience guarantees that you will transfer the same habits to work, school, or family life.

That distinction matters because games are often asked to justify themselves. If play has to make you smarter, more productive, or more employable, its ordinary pleasures can seem inadequate. They aren't. It is fair to value a game because it makes an evening more fun or gives friends something to share. It is also fair to ask whether a game's design, community, or demands suit you.

Keep the claims close to the evidence. Research can find a benefit in a particular setting without proving that all games produce it, for all people, in the long term. Personal experience can tell you what you enjoy, but it is not a universal result either. A grounded approach leaves room for both: games can be meaningful and enjoyable, and their effects vary. You do not have to defend your love of play with exaggerated promises.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Research spotlight

Online communities can be meaningful parts of people's lives, but their value is not universal. Pew Research Center found that about seven-in-ten people who belong to online communities say those spaces add something to their lives, while 29% say they bring little to no value². The same research found that 56% visit their most-visited community every day². Together, these findings suggest that some online spaces become regular, valued places of participation. They do not show that every community is helpful, that daily visits are automatically healthy, or that online connection works the same way for everyone. A useful takeaway is modest: if you find a community around a game, notice what you receive from it and what you contribute. You can appreciate a good fit, set limits, and move on when the space no longer feels worthwhile.

A life example

A DOCUMENTED EXAMPLE

Foldit: players working on a scientific puzzle

Foldit was a multiplayer online game that invited players around the world to solve difficult protein-structure prediction problems⁵. Its format combined cooperation and competition: players collaborated with teammates while competing with other players to produce high-scoring models⁵. The game made an unfamiliar scientific challenge something players could approach through the game's structures and shared effort.

In one reported case, the Foldit Void Crushers team selected a near-native model and improved it, producing the best model for that target among the groups involved⁵. In another part of the work, solutions from the Foldit Contenders Group produced phase estimates that enabled researchers to

solve the crystal structure⁵. The authors described the players' role in solving the M-PMV protease structure as an example of online games channeling human intuition and three-dimensional pattern-matching skills toward a difficult scientific problem⁵.

This is a striking example, not a promise about what games generally accomplish. It shows that, in a particular project, players' contributions mattered. It does not show that every multiplayer game solves a real-world problem, or that participation requires a scientific background. Its more modest lesson is that play can sometimes give people an inviting way to work together on something beyond the game.

TRY THIS

Notice what play gives you

Choose a game you already enjoy, or one you're curious about, and use one session to pay attention to the experience rather than to your score.

1. Before you begin, name one thing you hope to enjoy: discovery, a challenge, a story, company, or something else.
2. As you play, notice one moment when you became curious or especially absorbed.
3. Notice one moment that felt frustrating, confusing, or less enjoyable, without judging yourself for it.
4. Afterward, ask whether the game gave you what you were looking for, and whether anything would make the next session fit better.
5. If you played with someone else, consider what made the interaction comfortable or difficult.
6. Decide whether you want to play again, try a different approach, invite someone, or take a break.

Myths and honest truths

- **Myth:** Games are only for children or people trying to make gaming a career. **Truth:** Games are part of everyday cultural and social life for people across a wide age range. You can value them as leisure without making them a job or a lifelong identity¹.

- **Myth:** If a game is fun, it must be good for you; if it is not productive, it is a waste. **Truth:** Enjoyment is a valid reason to play, but it does not guarantee that every session suits you. You can pay attention to how a game feels and choose accordingly.
- **Myth:** Research showing a benefit proves that games help everyone in the same way. **Truth:** A result from one game or setting does not establish a universal effect. Keep claims specific, and make room for differences in people, games, and circumstances.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Games are a widespread part of culture and ordinary life, not merely a children's pastime or career path¹.
- Play can be worthwhile because it is enjoyable, even when it produces no measurable outcome.
- Games can create shared experiences, but the quality and fit of a community matter.
- Treat evidence as a guide to particular findings, not as proof that every game benefits every player.
- You can welcome games into your life while choosing when, how, and with whom you play.

REFLECT

1. *What kind of enjoyment do you hope to find in a game: challenge, discovery, story, company, or something else?*
2. *When have you felt welcome or unwelcome in a gaming space, and what made the difference?*
3. *What would help games fit comfortably alongside the other parts of your life?*

Nine more chapters are waiting

You've read the Introduction and Chapter 1. The full 92-page book continues with:

- CH. 2 The Joy of a Good Challenge
- CH. 3 Learn the Game, See the System
- CH. 4 Practice That Makes Progress
- CH. 5 Play Better Together
- CH. 6 Become a More Careful Digital Citizen
- CH. 7 Make Play More Accessible
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Plus the research analysis "What the Evidence Says", a 30-day practice plan, a glossary, and every source with full research credits.

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Sources for these chapters

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