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# Stop playing around and start playing seriously

Presentation by

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## About the presentation

Community sector workers usually start with the best of intentions but are too often met by outdated systems and poorly conceived rules and laws that prevent them from achieving the best results. There is no denying the sector is in need of a serious shake-up, but what does reform on this scale look like?

## Daniel Teitelbaum

Thank you for taking the leap of faith that I might be able to offer you something over the next 45 minutes that might be of value to you.

You've taken a leap of faith, because I'm talking about play, and that's not something a lot of people take seriously. The first reason I'm talking about play is because you're not talking about it enough. The second reason is that in the last few years, as I've looked more deeply into this thing called play – hard and strange to define, and probably not needing to be defined – I've found really powerful tools and ideas and practices that can help us throughout all of our everyday life, in our work and in our homes and in our relationships. Hopefully, today I can convince you of some of the value of play and suggest how you might be able to use it in your everyday life.

I hope to convince you that:

- **Play is deeply intertwined with human life.**  
Whether you like it or not, and whether you want to acknowledge it or not, the more we look into how play is a part of our lives, the more we can gain from that insight.
- **Play helps us to find meaning and opens us up to self-expression.**
- **Play helps us to create connected communities.**
- **Play helps us to think critically and to challenge authority.**

We're not going to be able to do that one, actually, because we won't have enough time, but I wanted to include it because I don't feel like this list is complete without it – and it's also a well-known game mechanism that if I create a sense of scarcity or denial you'll feel a greater sense of curiosity and desire about it, so I'm using that freely.

When I talk about play, I used to use an image of the playful universe. I was going to include it today because the universe theme, the space theme, is here as part of Communities in Control, but I've moved away from it because, unfortunately, space is being colonised

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by the egos of billionaires and there's no more room in it for us, which is a shame.

So instead I use the image of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Flemish painting by the artist, Pieter Bruegel called *Children's Games*. Somebody who's analysed it thought they could find 124 different types of play in this one image, and I use it now as my way into talking about how play is intertwined with every part of human life. I'm going to go through a kind of 'Where's Wally', finding all the little parts of how play interacts with life and going through the major intersections of play with other key disciplines or ways of thinking.

The first is **Philosophy**. Philosophers have talked very little about play. In fact, most early philosophers have said (Plato being a good example) that play is not a good thing. It's dangerous because it gives children too many ideas, and if they have too many ideas then our very controlling state can't control them. So Plato doesn't like play because of how powerful and dangerous it is.

Other philosophers suggest that all of human creation outside of the necessary – everything we do that we don't need to do, such as enjoying a lavish meal rather than a protein shake that gives us all our nutrients, or building a nice house rather than the simple shelter that we require, or sex not for procreation – you can thank play for that. Play helps us to create all of the things that we don't need, and that is all of human civilisation, all of the things that we've created. That's what some philosophers suggest. I'm not trying to convince you of that right now.

Next we look at **Science**, and science looks into how play has helped animals to grow and develop. There are studies that show animals with extreme play deprivation don't survive. They don't survive in the wild because they don't take the risks that are necessary for finding the things they need to find – food, shelter or other people or animals. Zoology and neuroscience look very deeply at how play is intimately a part of our growth and development, and even our evolutionary biology.

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**Education** is rich with ideas for play. I like to steal from the world of education. Play is all for children, but I like to take it from them and give it to adults. Education gives us really great insights into how play helps us to learn, how play helps us to synthesise information. Unfortunately, the state of education in the world, and in Australia, is not great, and we don't include enough game time in our education. In fact, the military uses games more effectively to educate and train their soldiers than we use it to educate and grow our children.

Games - serious games, educational games - are really important, and we don't use them often enough. Simulations help us synthesise information in real time. That's how we learn, not by long lists of dates and things like that. Education can benefit from play, and so can we.

**Design** – how do we create ideas, how do we come up with ideas collaboratively? Play is a treasure-trove of tools and practices and resources that you can take and use whenever you need to come up with new ideas, in your work, in your communities, wherever you are. We can steal from art and design and use their practices, their playful practices, in our everyday life.

**Therapy** now includes things like sand play or doll play, not just for children but for adults as well. That's because the conditions we need for play are safety, trust, a sense of our boundaries, and an awareness of what we're willing and not willing to do, and so does therapy. They both require a safe environment where you trust the person you are with. Play also allows us to talk about things metaphorically, not directly, and to express them in non-linguistic terms, which helps from a therapeutic context. So therapy is using play more and more for adults than it ever has before.

**The Performing Arts** are also a training ground for resilience, for confidence, for the ability to present, for navigating emotionally challenging situations, for stepping into the role or mindset of another person, for cultivating empathy. You don't have to be a performer. Just to engage in any level of the performing arts is

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going to train you in all those skills I've just mentioned. Engaging with the performing arts can help us to be fuller people.

**Toys and tools** involve a very special connection between the hand and the brain, and if we spend more time cultivating that connection, it can help us think. We actually see improved thinking, improved ideas, when we use our hands as opposed to when we don't. One example is Lego Serious Play, which is used in boardrooms and executive boardrooms all over the world to talk about ideas in a business context using storytelling and metaphor rather than buzzwords and KPIs. New ideas come up in that context.

Another beautiful example of how toys and tools can help us is the Empathy Toy, created initially to help school students empathise with blind children. It's a special game that has a number of particular blocks. A person builds a structure with the blocks. Then you're blindfolded, and the person has to explain to you how to recreate the building that they made themselves. As a result, we see what's really challenging about communication, how we misunderstand each other, and what it might be like to hear instructions as a blind person and not be able to follow them because the instructions are terrible. The Empathy Toy allows us to understand what happens in communication and what happens when we miscommunicate, and it's a really wonderful toy that we can use to engage.

**Playgrounds** – well, not so much playgrounds as our built environments – are also a really important way to think about play, and whether our built environments allow us to engage with other people in the way we want to. Is the built environment inviting us into playful interaction, or is it allowing us to avoid everybody as we move through the space? If we think about playgrounds, we start to think about how the built environment encourages different kinds of interaction.

Another good example is *Child in the City*, which is a not-for-profit organisation that looks at how our built environment is completely unaccommodating to children. It's built for adults, and it's actually

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quite dangerous for children who want to be out in the street. As a result, children move out into the world less. The radius of space that they might move into is dropping. We've got a number of generations in the room, so you can probably testify to this. Older generations, when young, would probably have been allowed to walk a number of kilometres by themselves away from the home, or to travel on a tram, and to do a whole lot of things that are forbidden for kids today – that would be mad to allow a child to do. That's partly because parenting has probably changed a little bit, but so has the urban environment, and it's not allowing anywhere near as much play, especially for young people, as it could.

And finally, if we look to the world of games, they can teach us about ourselves. They can teach us about choice and meaning. Every game designer has to think deeply about choices, and the meaning in our choices, in order to create a meaningful game. We're going to get into that in just a moment.

I hope that, at least to some extent, I might have convinced you of this very first point – think bigger and fix everything by thinking more about play. I'm not asking you to do anything yet. Just think more about play. Is there any nods that agree that we want to do that? Okay, good, all right, excellent. Just checking if I'm anywhere near on the right track.

Enough talking about play. Now to do some play. So we're going to play a game, and the game we're going to play is 'This or That'. It's fairly simple. I'm going to put up two words on the screen, and all you have to do is think about which one you're more like. It's not hard. I'll give you 10 seconds to do that. Once you've done that, I'm going to ask you to turn to the person next to you and to guess which one they picked. Once you've done that, you can share with us which one you picked and why.

Ready? I'll give you 10 seconds just to think and to choose which one you're more like. That's how you play. Select a word. Guess your partner's choice of word, and then explain.

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First set of words. Are you a tree or a river? Go! Think, think, think. And those of you playing online, too, think – which one you are more like? Now turn to the person next to you, and guess, and explain.

We're going to play one more time. Are you more like a submarine or a helicopter? You've got 10 seconds to think and then, when you're ready, you have to guess the person next to you and explain why you chose yours.

Okay. How was that? Was that fun? Was that interesting? Good. For those of you playing online, you can also just chuck into the chat which you are, and why, or guess for other people that you know on the chat – just play along in your own way. And also, throughout the conference, see if you can find your twins – people who are both a helicopter and a tree - or your cousins, who are one of each – and your opponents, who have nothing in common with you.

I use this game as a way of telling you that play helps us to create meaning. I don't know how your conversations went. I saw a lot of hand gestures. But I assume that it might have been, for some of you, a way in to understanding somebody else in a deeper way, and probably a catalyst for a different kind of conversation you might have. We can use that game in all kinds of contexts to set the tone for what we're talking about – to make it easy and fun and playful and comfortable to talk about all kinds of things using a very, very simple game structure.

This game was created by an organisation called PlayReactive. The director of that organisation told me that the design brief he had for himself when he created the game was to create something that offered as much opportunity for meaning in as simple a structure as possible, and I think he achieved that. It's a very simple choice between two words, and through it we can understand more about ourselves and each other.

Another thing that PlayReactive do is create immersive theatre and gaming experiences to create meaning, to help us think about things. They did a project with City of Melbourne called You Care,

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and it was to explore what might it be like in the future when our hospitals and doctor surgeries are so technologically advanced we don't need doctors or technology. Will we feel a lack of the care connection that we now have? You might theorise about that all you like, or you can create an experience in which people go through it and tell you what it was like to be in that state. So we can explore new environments, new ideas, new things, using PlayReactive's style of using games and performance.

For the other way games create meaning, and play creates meaning, think about game designers. When they think about choices within the game, they have to ask, at every stage of the game, about the player making the choice. - what is their experience? Why would they make this choice? What about their identity might cause them to make one choice over another? What about what they know, or assume? What about their influences or their fears or their desires? Which of their relationships are going to influence the choice they make? Using game design, we can more deeply understand human beings by looking at their choices.

Another quick example is Nicky Case, a game designer who created a whole lot of really interesting games. One is their coming out simulator, which simulates, for people going through the process, what it might be like to come out about a different sexual or gender identity, and how to go through the kinds of conversations you're going to have. Who are you going to tell first? What are you going to say? What if they say this back to you? The simulator has helped a lot of people to do the preparatory steps that they might need before coming out in real life. It's a really powerful tool for people to step into what might be a challenging scenario, but safely, because it's a game.

Another of their games is Parable of Polygons, which looks at segregation. It's very simple. All the rules say is that each polygon wants to be around polygons where at least a third of them are the same as them. Not everybody: I don't need everyone around me to be my kind of people. I just need a couple of people who are similar to me. That seems like a reasonable, non-xenophobic, position to

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hold, but we find in this game that it's actually almost impossible, even with such a low bar, to create non-segregated societies by dragging and dropping the polygons. The simple maths of wanting to have a third of people similar to you is enough to make it impossible to avoid segregation.

So the second thing I want to convince you of is "Think bigger and fix everything – by allowing play to open us up to more meaningful interactions." Do we agree? Have I convinced some people? A few nods? Okay, a couple (less so than before). That's all right. New game. Here we go.

Visualise Louis XVI, known for his lavish meals – as large as they could be. We're going to use it to play "What's for Dinner". This game is a bit more challenging. Those of you playing online, there might be some of it not accessible to you, but we'll see how we go. I trust you to try and make it work for yourself. Here's how it goes. First thing, everybody hold your left hand up like this. I want you to imagine that on your hand is a nice big white dinner plate. You can feel its weight. And now I want you to imagine your favourite meal sitting on that plate. If closing your eyes helps, please do it. Even get the smell of it. What is your favourite meal? What does it smell like? If your mouth is watering, you're imagining well enough. If it's not, you can dial it up a little bit.

And now I want you to hold your right hand up like this. Ideally, you'll be within arm's reach of somebody. And when I say, "Go," on the count of three, I want you to put your finger into the dinner of the person next to you. One, two, three. And now that you've done that, I want you, in your little groups and tables, just turn to whoever's next to you, look them in the eye and tell them what your favourite meal is, so they know what their finger's been in. All right? If you're online, you can just type your favourite meal into the chat.

For those of us here in person, I'll tell you why I play this game at the start of every single workshop I run (it was taught to me by a man named Marcus Veerman, who runs an organisation called Playground Ideas, a beautiful organisation that builds playgrounds

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in the developing world where the default playgrounds are usually rubbish piles and dangerous spaces). I do it because food makes us feel safe. At the start of a workshop I want people to start to feel safe and trust me. It creates a physical connection, very minimal but enough, enough to break the isolating bubble around us and allow us to be more physical and more affectionate with other people. We use our voice, which is really important - well, Hugh Mackay said it yesterday – to be listened to and to be heard, and so I like to have people use their voice immediately at the start of a workshop. We make eye contact, which is very special. It gives us a sense of the human moment, that we are around other people, and we laugh together, and that's a great way to make us feel comfortable doing things together. That's why I do it.

That brings us to my next point, which is that play opens us up to self-expression. We might imagine self-expression as something like running around naked, painting – very creative and wild things. I'm going to talk about self-expression through the ideas of Augusto Boal, who was a Brazilian theatre director in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s. Boal brought us a range of really, really important ideas that I think still haven't had their time and are going to cause future revolutions, and his work begins by telling us that, over time, we reduce our expressive capacity. Over time, we stop moving in new ways, we stop thinking in new ways, and, to continue to be expressive, we need to continue to move in different ways and branch out, so he has a whole range of activities for how we can do that.

Here are his three books. In *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, he talks about the importance of movement and new ways of movement to break us out of our stagnant way of being and thinking. Then he writes in *Theatre of the Oppressed* that the history of theatre has made us passive. When we go into a theatre context we get a sense of catharsis, but we come away without any shift in our moral sensibilities. We are no more inclined to act in the real world, to make a moral difference. Boal thought this should be the purpose of theatre – that the performing arts should allow us an opportunity to test what we believe morally; to break down, and

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analyse, and work with other people to understand, what we think should happen in the world.

Boal created a very special form of theatre called Forum Theatre, which works like this. If there was a play happening up here on stage, you as the audience would not be spectators. You would be invited to be spectactors – an awkward word to say, but a beautiful concept. The idea is that you can, at any point, get up onto the stage and take control of the scene. You can demand that actors replay parts of the scene with different dialogue, or with different actions. You can, if frustrated by their inability to meet what you believe should be in the play, kick them out and be an actor in the play and change the course and the direction of the play and the way it's going. He thought that by doing this, we become more ethical people.

If you go through the world today, we can see that people are more inclined to take out their phone and film something happening in the street than to step up and do anything, to step in and to say, "Do you need a hand?" or "Can I help in any way?" or "What's going on here?" Instead, we film it. That's okay, it's actually very useful in certain cases, but in other cases what we'd like to do is see spectactors – people willing to step into the world, into the real world that they're in, to change the plot, to change the direction of the play, to make a difference.

Augusto Boal tells us to find self-expression not just for the joy of it but so we can be ethically more expressive, so we can have more greater integrity in our ethics and in how we step into situations. So, number 3. "Think bigger and fix everything by being a spectactor", and by cultivating an opportunity for involvement and engagement wherever you can.

The last point I want to make is that play helps us to create community, and I'm going to talk about the new Games Foundation. We're still in the 1970s, then, but we're travelling to California and we're meeting a series of peace activists who, in response to the Vietnam War, thought "Well, actually, society is really competitive –

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combative, in fact – and we need to give people an example of collaborative and cooperative ways of being." They asked Stewart Brand to create a game that would allow people to navigate conflict safely. He created a large-scale rough-and-tumble game with heaps of people pushing the ball from one side of the field to the other. It was rough, and people could run around, and the result was that conflict was mediated safely through play.

After that initial event the New Games Foundation was born, to teach people all the different ways we can play and, in doing so, all the different ways we can engage in society at large. The New Games Foundation ran new games tournaments. At their peak, there were 10,000 people over a four-day period on a massive field under the Golden Gate Bridge playing and teaching each other games. This is what a new games tournament looks like; all kinds of fun and crazy games. The point was you'd make them up, on the spot, and you'd share them with other people, and all the games you came up with would evolve and change based on the needs of the players. Whatever the players wanted is the direction it would go in. It wasn't about playing defined games – it was about playing games you made up on the spot in free-flowing fun.

This is called 'This is my Nose', but you'll notice he's pointing to his chin. This is another one, 'Earth Ball'. One of the movement's founders, a man named Bernie DeKoven, wrote a book called *The Well-Played Game* and in it he gives us the idea of the play community. In the play community, the game changes to suit the players, as opposed to a game community, where the players change but the game stays the same. The AFL is one example; every week it's Australian Rules. Even though they change those rules occasionally, much to everybody's disappointment, it's still going to be a footy game every week, though the players might change as people are benched, injured, or move on.

If we were to turn the AFL into a play community, you'd have the same players every week, you'd have the same teams, but every single week the game would change, and they could play a range of games that they invent on the spot, they could play soccer and then

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cricket. The community stays the same, and is central to the play experience, but the game changes, so that the people in the community can find different ways of playing. They can follow their curiosity, their enjoyment, their connection, because the game changes.

As an analogy, a lot of our communities are game communities, where the rules won't change and people have to fit within them. In a play community, we allow the rules to change to allow people more access to play, to allow people to feel safe in the play. Broadly speaking, I want to encourage us towards play communities instead of game communities. And that's a metaphor, but that's also within the ways you play now. If you have a games night, I'm sure you do change the game rather than the players. That's probably what you experience anyway.

How do we cultivate the play community? First of all, we need everybody to come with a willingness to be a part of a play community. They're not there to be a part of a game community. They're there to play, and they're there to play well, and to play in the way that the play community asks of them – to be open to change and to creating an environment where everybody can feel equal access to play.

You need to cultivate trust. You need to cultivate safety. You need to be aware of your boundaries and everybody's boundaries within the play. And familiarity, which is also really important. You need to play over time: the more we play with the same group of people, the more comfortable we are to express ourselves and follow our curiosity, to really extend and push out the ways we play and to find more of ourselves in that. We need to find the well-played game.

Number four: "Think bigger and fix everything by cultivating play communities." We're going to play one final game now, to give you a sense of what the new Games Movement might have played in one of their tournaments. It's called 'Convergence' or 'Twins'. How do you play? I want you and the person next to you – online, you can put this into the chat as a group – to each say a word simultaneously.

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I'll count you down. I'm going to go, "Three, two, one, go," and you'll say a word, "Three, two, one, go," and you're going to say another word simultaneously, and you're going to keep saying words as long as I say, "Three, two, one, go," until you reach the same word, or we've had enough of the game and we stop it without reaching convergence. Okay?

All right. Ready, set, go. Three, two, one, go. Three, two, one, go. Three, two, one, go. Three, two, one, go. Three, two, one, go. Three, two, one, go. That's probably enough of that. Did anyone reach convergence? Hands up if you did - yes, we have one, two, three. You get a car. You get a car. Great, fantastic.

That's an adaptation from the kinds of games you'd play in a New Games tournament. There's no winner or loser. It's a collaborative game. It's a fun game, and it can go on endlessly. It can change. You could bring five people into it and try to reach it all together the same word, which might be really challenging but really interesting. This is what it was like – an evolving, changing way of playing so that we can explore new ideas, new things and feel greater connection.

I want to leave you with one sentence, the thing that I hoped to prove today. Play is deeply intertwined with human life, it helps us find and create meaning, it opens us up to ethical self-expression, and it can guide us to create compassionate and connected communities.

And I guess that's my offering on how we can think bigger and fix everything. Thank you very much.

**ENDS**

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