

# Giving permission for adults to play

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## ABSTRACT

Play is often seen as inappropriate in adult settings, with social expectations causing adults to frame situations in such a way that we often lack permission to play. Semi-structured interviews with a fourteen people who use playful approaches with adults were carried out to explore how they gave this “permission to play” in their contexts. It was seen that they used a range of different ways consistent with the idea of needing to signal a shift in frame, and this range of approaches to giving “permission to play” are grouped and summarised in the article.

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## Introduction

In adult life, it can be difficult to play outside of certain highly constrained settings. Adults can play act in amateur dramatics societies, or carry out physical play in sports clubs, but outside these socially approved settings, play tends to be seen as socially unacceptable. Taking a playful attitude to work, education, or visibly playing in public is therefore reduced, particularly free or imaginative play (Van Leet & Feeney, 2015). It becomes a “political act”, being seen playing in public, making a statement about who you are and how you choose to interact, making it difficult to play publicly as a “normal” or everyday behaviour (Koh, 2014; De Koven, 2014, p. 160).

It has been suggested (Goffman, 1986) that this is due to how we, as social animals, “frame” a situation, and we need alibis, or excuses, to allow us to play as adults (Deterling, 2017). Goffman (1971, p. 28) describes how individuals tend to play a part in any situation, asking them to “believe that the character they see, actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess”. We act in the way we believe is socially acceptable, pretending to be the person that we feel the social situation demands. Deterling’s (2017) “alibis” are a way of closing off potential disapproving aspects of a non-playful frame, suggesting that Audience Management (removing

potentially disapproving observers); Awareness Management (interrupting the chance for observers and players to see each other); and Role Distancing (mocking, or parodying the play itself so that participants can distance themselves from it) can enable play to happen. This has overlaps with the idea of “keying” (Goffman, 1986) that sets the conventions in which participants view any activity or social situation.

We pick up on “keys” continually, which help us decide how to behave, including when to transition from one set of behaviours to another. So when we walk into a formal meeting we may see figures of authority, formal seating arrangements, set agendas, and other keys that we recognise from similar situations. We therefore start to act in a way set by prior experience to try and meet the “formal meeting” frame, and feel awkward or embarrassed when we (or others) fail to meet these expectations. Deterling’s (2017) list recognises that this embarrassment prevents us from acting more playfully and suggests ways in which we can remove some of the more significant sources of embarrassment.

The idea of removing embarrassment works together with the normal way in which we shift frames, that of keying to others that we would like to start acting in a different way. Glenn et al (1987) describes how group members would naturally, and informally, signal to each other that they want to move into a play situation. This often starts with small verbal or physical actions to provoke a response from others, with a positive or negative response deciding on a whether a shift to a playful frame is desirable. This may be a short term shift, with a small amount of joking, or silly, verbal communication, or a more significant shift that allows longer term playful behaviours.

Most frames for adults are inherently non-playful based on previous experiences, so although adults do play, it is often short-term playful interludes, or in strictly controlled circumstances. This suggests that giving adults permission to play is about signalling, or keying, more playful behaviour, and potentially giving alibis for behaviours that go against the normative frame for a situation.

## **Methodology**

To investigate how it may be possible to signal to adults that they have permission to play, fourteen people were interviewed. These were either approached directly as people already known to the researcher as enabling play with adults through their work, or recruited through a Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/counterplay/>) as people who use play with adults. The interviewees worked in a wide range of contexts, from learning developers in Higher Education, to artists, to festival organisers.

It would be expected that the examples in the “permission to play” categories would be different for an alternative group of interviewees, and a slightly different set of categories may emerge, but the analysis below

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illustrates how this particular set of interviewees try to enable play. Further interviews and data gathering would further enrich and extend the examples and the categories. In this article we illustrate the breadth of examples given by the interviewees, rather than making claim to a comprehensive list. The approach taken aimed to show a breadth of ways in which play practitioners approached their work, with all responses treated as equally valid. As such, quotes are used throughout this analysis without identifying, even anonymously, individual interviewees, or detailing how many interviewees made statements which might fit into any particular category.

The interviews were semi-structured, with a small number of key topics covered, but which could expand into any area of discussion that seemed appropriate in the discussion. Nearly 10 hours of recordings resulted from these interviews.

Any mentions of how the interviewees enabled play was coded twice, with the categories emerging naturally from the transcripts themselves. Once they had been coded for the first time, a small number of similar categories were changed, some were split into more specific categories, and the data coded again accordingly. This resulted in 29 categories. These were then grouped into 6 overarching groupings, plus an additional grouping that mentioned the opposite of permission to play. These are given in detail in the section below.

### **Permission to play categories**

Twenty-nine different categories emerged from the analysis of interviews, which were grouped into six main overarching types of permission, plus a small extra group of examples that appear to remove permission to play. These will be outlined below, including details of both the overarching types and the individual categories. Phrases in bold refer to individual categories in the chart below, with text in italics being quotes from interviewees.

Types of permission	Categories
Voluntary nature of play	Force People; Ok to watch.
Authority (external to players)	Management authority; Authority of prior research; Removing personal authority; personal silliness; personal authority.
Social, or group, "Authority" or pressure	Players (and past players) own experience and justification; Use prior association with playful experiences.
Space and environmental clues	Social or playful spaces; Props (or focussing on objects); OPPOSITE to the social / playful environment; Privacy (no external or non-playing observers).
Managing the transition into play	Gifting / generosity; Planning in detail; Continual re-assurance (safety); Freedom stressed (ownership?) to change rules; Easing people into play; Setting clear expectations; Label as "something other than play".
Drivers for playing	Fun, Surprise and disruption; Competition; NO competition; Humour (from external sources?); Exploration; Story, Play for plays sake.
Things that stop play (the negatives / anti-play)	<i>No smaller categories.</i>



*Diagram: Visual representation of the categories*

## **Voluntary nature of play**

Interestingly, the two categories here are complete opposites, as they outline the approaches interviewees take to either allowing people the choice to play or not, to force them to become full participants in a playful exercise, or allow them to stay on the fringes. It could be argued that it is never ok to force people to play, as it is normally argued that play ceases to be play when it is forced (“Play is a voluntary activity” is central to many definitions, e.g. McGonigal, 2011; Suits 2005; Schell, 2008), but the reality is somewhat nuanced than that. In practice, some interviewees seemed to force people to participate in a playful activity in order to enable play to happen for most people, even if that means that some are not fully, or truly, playing themselves.

Some interviewees stressed the optional nature of any play activity, and the way it was ok to be peripheral to any playful exercise. These were categorised as ok to watch. Some of these saw the benefits of the activity as being realised even when participants were not comfortable allowing themselves to truly play, “...not too worried about people playing as they can still spend time with their colleagues and gain benefits”. This applied even where they recognised that people would only ever watch others playing an activity, as they would still

learn through observation. An example of this was given of a physical game at an event in Finland that required three people to play. This involved one person in the middle (the “censor”) and two “pleasers” who have to make pleasing sensations on the arms of the censor. The censor moves in the direction of the person who makes the most pleasing sensation. The bulk of the group were observers, and when this is played, the interviewee stressed how they made sure everyone knew that some people would play, some would watch, and that both choices were equally valid. This category also saw watching, or only taking part in a peripheral way (“ok, you can hold the timer”), as being the first step to drawing people into taking a fuller part in play. It allowed participation without being the centre of any play activity. One phrased such an approach as “offering the play, but not forcing it”, where they expected people to increasingly join in, even when they were reluctant to start playing initially.

In direct contrast to this, some of the interviewees described how they force people to take part in play activities. They may do this through launching straight into play activities “while people are keen” at the start of a session, rather than easing people into such an activity. Several interviewees described how they saw people not playing as a barrier to others taking part, and this was the most common reason for trying to force participation. In one activity, it was described how “...when students choose not to play, they can create a schism in the class, or in their group, that people cannot get over. Because if people are not on the playful side of the river, there is nothing you can do and the others can’t cross”. This could be directly linked to the need for privacy in play too, with one interviewee’s insistence on “all playing together, no observers” right from the start linked to a desire to make sure that “there is no-one looking at us and making us feel embarrassed”. One interesting way of enforcing engagement with an activity was to make it more embarrassing to refuse to play than to take part, through singling out people that look disengaged, “I find myself calling it out a lot more when people refuse to engage with a play activity. When I give talks I’m more likely to single out people who don’t look like they are taking part and challenge them why <...> if I challenge it then people are more likely to take part as the easier option!”.

### **Authority (external to players)**

The idea that a facilitator of play could invoke an authority to validate play was outlined in various forms. Sometimes this authority was borrowed from the research literature (authority of prior research); sometimes from the facilitator’s own position or experience (personal authority); or from the willingness to model “silly” behaviours (personal silliness). The authority given by senior management could also contribute (management authority). These examples tend to reduce the barriers to play by giving an external justification to the players, pointing towards the research, the authority of the external figures, or the willingness of authority figures to model playfulness without embarrassment.

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Several of the interviewees worked in Higher Education settings, so it is perhaps no surprise that they pointed towards the authority of prior research, using intellectual justifications for using play. This was often at the start of any playful session, “linking to educational theory” or validating at the start with research findings and trying to make the “context of the playful activity visibly rigorous to the students otherwise they don’t engage”. It was seen that there was a need to adopt a rationale that shows that the facilitators are not trivialising education or work, or that the activities were purely to increase engagement, but instead that the “authority of the research” suggested an “increased depth” or effectiveness of learning. There was also mention of the value of this approach during the session to increase participation from reluctant players who didn’t otherwise see the value of play, “If I see someone holding back, I’ll say this is important because <...> it helps explain the psychological value, it makes it sound a bit more evidence based”.

There was often an inherent personal authority in the positions of the interviewees, as organisers and facilitators of play which could be used to give permission to play. Some were also in a position of authority within an organisation, which allowed them a perceived authority to encourage play, or the use of play, in colleagues. ⇐ This authority could come out directly and forcefully, “The <...> students do it because I’ve told them to do and I’m their lecturer”. However, it is often discussed in terms of visibly modelling playful practice, and the facilitator’s authority enabling others to follow, “There is a formality” to a normal teaching space, or a conference space, that sets up expectations, so it feels like you have to be much more performative” and “If the people with power in the room are playing, or the people in charge of your time, then usually, unless they are some sort of dictator, then usually that is implicit permission for you to play as well”.

This personal authority at times leaked into work relationships for some of the interviewees, “I think this has changed now I’m in a more senior role. I feel like I could bring play with me into this position in ways that would have been harder before”. There was a recognition that this authority as a play expert was sometimes less important than management authority, “I’m often one of the more senior people in the room, but I don’t try these things with the highest level of management”, with management authority important to both allow our interviewees to be playful, and the end participants too. One person ran a workshop for students to make escape rooms, which they felt already fitted into the ethos of innovation and creativity in the workplace. However, getting a small amount of project funding, together with the potential to write up and disseminate, was seen as concrete and visible “approval” of senior management, which made it easier to get people to take part in the escape room activities.

There was a tendency towards the personal authority being transformed into a modelling of personal silliness to show that acting contrary to expectations, especially through silliness, was ok even in work settings “It isn’t mandatory to be silly, but it can move in that direction”. This doesn’t necessarily remove authority, or even the seriousness of the reasons behind activities, but shows that authority can approve of such behaviour, “you can

be serious while being silly and informal". It can also be used to model that lack of technical ability, is not only acceptable, but expected, "I do crazy stuff with my body to show people it is ok to be quirky, and you don't have to dance, because most of the time I facilitate dance workshops <...> It lets people show that they can take part without being able to dance, it is ok to do anything as I have been crazy".

### **Social, or group, "Authority" or pressure**

As may be expected, there was discussion of how pressure from within the group could enable play. This could be straightforward peer-pressure, but it also included triggering associations from times when group members had previously felt they were allowed to be playful.

Some interviewees described how they planned activities so that group members felt Peer Pressure to take part, so that it felt the norm to be playing and more embarrassing to hold back than to participate "everyone has to be in a circle to progress to the next level, or there needs to be a certain level of noise", so in effect there was a threat of social censure to not play. At times this could stretch to planting someone into the group to guide and encourage "I would often play pretending to be a member of the public. Partly to encourage the playfulness, then partly if they couldn't pass the level I would try and bring the group towards finding the solution", which could tip the feeling within the group towards playfulness.

Using Players own experience and justification could be used to encourage groups that were only slowly engaging with activities. At times this was a case of allowing participants to slowly see the benefits and becoming immersed once they do, "People needed to be able to see it as a useful activity before they allowed themselves to play it", or drawing out positive reasons for engaging with activity from people who had already engaged, "in one session, two people wouldn't vote on how they felt about something, so during a Q&A later on, they said that they didn't feel the activities were worthwhile <...> I turned this around by asking the room to say why they felt it DID have value". Other examples pointed towards the experiences of people who had previously taken part in an activity, using phrases such as "students who have done this found it incredibly useful in their studies" before giving examples, or using quotes from previous players to "try to create a fear of missing out".

As well as directly linking to a particular playful experience, examples were given of linking to more generic playful experiences, and borrowing the positive and playful expectations from those memories. This use of prior association with playful experiences could be as simple as having signifiers of games or toys around the room, or linking a playful activity to a story likely to be shared by the group, such as using a Harry Potter theme. At times this made specific links to children or childhood, "when adults are with children they feel permission to go with the child", but it also included links to where the facilitator felt that we were allowed to



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be playful as adults. This could be the use of a game based on dating apps, or a formal game that adults felt able to participate in, such as “a crazy golf game that taught about medical research. Playing crazy golf is fine and people would do it...”. The digital environment came up multiple times here, with some interviewees seeing adults as increasingly comfortable seeing phones and tablets as playful devices, which can give “a background permission to play that makes it easier for us”.

### **Space and environmental clues**

The space in which any activity takes place was seen as having a large impact on any permission to play. Some spaces could be inherently playful and some people sought out social or playful spaces (such as makerspaces, or spaces used for social activities), but often the interviewees tried to alter the space to help enable play to take place, making them feel more collaborative or playful. Contrary to this, one interviewee discussed how restrictive and poor environments could sometimes encourage dark play, where people reacted to a bad environment by becoming playful in a more subversive way, though this wasn't seen as a positive way of encouraging play by them. This seemed OPPOSITE to the social / playful environment that they normally tried to encourage, but one in which play could emerge as a coping mechanism.

Within the restriction of existing spaces, props, or objects that supported a playful environment, were seen as valuable. These could be used to deliberately distract or disrupt an otherwise formal environment, such as putting playful objects in the centre of group tables, such as the interviewee who deliberately picked items that “are silly, doesn't really make sense” such as bubble mixture that can “link to childhood memories and the mood or feeling of playing”. They were also used to signal an expectation of activity, such as one person who thought that “giving everyone a tool” was useful for this, or another who gave people cards that contained instructions for people to interact in a playful manner – the expectation of activity was set by the materials. Props could be used to encourage participants to talk about an object rather than themselves, something that is key to the Lego Serious Play methodology (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014), but that one interviewee called “imaginative projection”.

Finally, within space issues, privacy was seen as a powerful tool, and lack of privacy an impediment. If possible, privacy from observation was seen as a way of removing the embarrassment of acting inappropriately, with an example given of LARPing (Live Action Role Play) being much easier when done purely with other LARPerS, compared to in a public place “Any element where people are watching you feel more awkward”. Some people had the rule that everyone present must be playing together, with no observers right from the start, “so there is no-one looking at us and making us feel embarrassed”. In one project discussed by an interviewee, they created a playful and interactive space within a 6x3m shipping container. Although this was sited in a public space, the privacy of the interior helped to enable play, and they told all players that the key

rule was “what goes in in the box, stays in the box”.

### **Managing the transition into play**

This category involved various ways in which the boundary between not playing and playing was managed. It often involved giving nudges to participants to ensure they feel that they are on the correct path, and have autonomy to control where it is taking them. The focus is often on making sure that when play has started, it can continue, rather than going into reverse.

Planning in detail was seen as a way of helping the facilitator feel safe in their own ability to allow play to happen. It gave the opportunity to deviate and adapt as an activity went on, as the person in charge felt they had a firm base from which to allow the participants to be playful, even if that was not exactly what they had originally intended.

An explicit setting of clear expectations for participants was seen as important, rather than surprising them with something they may not expect. This emerged in various ways, from simply stating that games and playful approaches would be used, to promoting in more detail the activities and expectations on promotional material for workshops and events. Some did this through echoing back to familiar tropes and situations, such as an interactive performance using a courtroom setting. People had an idea of what a jury does, and how it may be expected to behave, so they could adopt those normal social rules, rather than worrying about the rules of a game. When the activity is more of a formal game, codifying what people should do was important, giving players a target to aim for an a clear purpose that they can see, and check on when needed - “At least with a board game, you feel you can read the rules”. Several people mentioned an early playful activity as being important in setting expectations, rather than starting in a more formal way and then expecting participants to shift to a more playful mode. This may be starting with a warm-up style game or activity, or simply verbally telling people “there is a lot of playing this week”.

Related to the idea of props, gifting / generosity in the use of props that participants can keep could help further immerse them in play. When given materials to use and keep, they can “feel seen, they feel heard, they feel recognised”, helping to empower them to act in a playful way. This can help give a “sense of obligation” to give things back, such as their time and commitment to the activity itself, even if the gifts are “silly things like a feather or a seashell nicely wrapped up” to prompt activities.

A key attribute of play is that participants must feel like they can change the rules, they aren’t completely bound by the rules set by an external agency. Having the freedom stressed to change rules helped some people to move from a planned activity into a more playful mode. This can be implicit in the way an activity is planned, such as by removing the sense that it will be assessed in any way, but it was normally much more

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explicit. Participants could be pushed to break the rules put in place to start an activity, “I don’t actually care if you’re playing the game correctly...”, but often it is more about empowering them so they can do if they wish. This could be done by delegating power to the group “I lead the first game, but then I get other people in the group to lead a game in subsequent classes”, or (in a physical, movement workshop) stressing that “the body knows, trust your body and don’t go there”, reinforcing that they should listen to themselves and their bodies more than an external authority. This can be difficult for any leader, or facilitator, of an activity, with the expectation that they are happy “going with the flow”, even if things don’t happen exactly as planned.

Some of the interviewees talked of giving continual re-assurance, right from the start, letting participants know that whatever they are doing is correct behaviour, even if they may be unsure if they are allowed to act in a playful way based on past experiences. This was often discussed as creating safe places for participants, where being playful was the norm, “A place people can be playful. A place where it is encouraged. A place where it is valued and rewarded. Interact with everyone individually and make sure they are comfortable. Very friendly” and constantly checking that participants are comfortable participating, at ease in the activities. “The atmosphere, the framing of the activity, before people arrive, the way you welcome people”, helped people feel safe and be re-assured that playful behaviour was seen as acceptable.

Slowly easing people into play, rather than expecting them to quickly take part in unstructured play was an important way of transitioning from a non-play to a more playful state. This often took the form of “simple types of play” that could be built upon, especially once a facilitator had then calibrated their activities based upon the audience. There was an expectation that “if people haven’t done things like this before, you can’t expect huge spontaneity”, and that simple play activities allowed facilitators to “kind of get wackier as they go along”, as activities become more creative and imaginative. One example of easing people into physical play was to use the idea of practice rounds, where volunteers could be the first players, followed by everyone else once they have seen their peers do the exercise.

Another way of easing people into play is to label it as “something other than play”, as the concept of play can deter people more than the actual activities. Using words and phrases that people might find more acceptable, such as “creativity”, “embodied cognition”, “reification”, or “art” provided an easier route into play for some people. These words came with “different rules, different constraints”, that could overcome barriers. As one interviewee said, if you tell participants “now we’re going to play, you’ll get a different reaction than if you say... well, the way we’re going to form the agenda is we’re going to use this technique, and you call it a technique then they’ll probably be with you even if its quite a playful technique”.

## **Drivers for playing**

Various types of players, together with reasons for playing, have been identified in the literature, particularly Bartle's (1996) player types, which has since been built on by others (e.g. Stewart, 2011; Zackariasson, Wåhlin, & Wilson, 2010). These types of drivers for playing were used by some of the interviewees as a way of enabling play to happen. At a basic level, the idea of fun was emphasised in playful activities, to "try to bring joy to the world" and to justify play, which could sit alongside the use of humour, with one interviewee showing a briefing video that is deliberately silly and humorous. Competition was used to encourage those players driven by the idea of winning, which can be as basic as quizzes and earning points, but this was balanced by the idea that competition can also be a barrier for some players, so NO competition, or cooperative activities, were favoured by some, seen as part of "being nice to new people and making sure it is an inclusive experience". Including elements of surprise and disruption was seen as a driver for some players, including predetermined rules that unlock prizes, such as biscuits for meetings. These surprises were seen as enabling a more playful and pleasurable experience, with work colleagues helped to find "the pleasure in what we are doing". One person who used an element of surprise and disruption "knows that everybody will take more from <...> if something interesting happens", including herself. This helps give her permission to play, as well as others. Exploration is often seen as a motivation for players, particularly within video games, and can be used to encourage a playful mindset, where exploration leads onto greater play. In one example, a game developer used the phrase "come and help me grow a garden", which they feel allowed people to "safely explore different ways of playing". This was echoed in non-digital approaches, where physical games could focus on inviting people to explore the space they are in, or their own bodies, through playful movement. Story or narrative was used to drive forward play, but also for inviting play to start, allowing players to more easily inhabit an "alternative play world". A slightly more niche approach was an interviewee who insisted that "The purpose of playing is to become more playful and to create conditions in which play can thrive", this play for play's sake empathises that play should not be about any particular outcomes, but that the idea of play itself should drive all play activities.

## **Things that stop play (the negatives / anti-play)**

A few examples were given during the interviews that didn't seem to fit naturally into any of the other categories, but were things that stop play, and were worth acknowledging as the antithesis of some of the above examples that help to give permission to play. These were seen as particularly important to those working in Higher Education, where students (particularly traditional undergraduate populations) were seen as wanting "to put childish things behind them", in a way that didn't apply to final year, or more mature students. The financial and employment drivers in Higher Education settings were also seen as a driver for resistance to play, "if it isn't what people pay their student fees for", then any activity was seen as not useful enough to justify.

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More generally, a fear of wasting time was seen as preventing play, with the “work ethic” of modern Western society seen as producing guilt about playing unless you can see, and justify, a firm purpose for it.

### **Further discussion and Conclusion**

All of the categories seem to fit the idea of trying to re-frame situations, making it seem the norm to act in a playful way. They might use perceived authority to set that norm (wherever that authority seems to arise from), or the space itself (re-framing it through props, social prompts, etc.).

There is a strong sense of signalling (keying) a transition to a playful frame throughout, and the drivers for playing probably sit within this even though it might be less obvious than with other categories. Rather than relying on signals from the facilitator or the space, they try to start people playing and then rely on the signals that will naturally arise as people engage with an activity. Although interviewees didn’t express it in such a way when talking about these drivers, there was an underlying sense that once some people within started to play, that enabled others to take part even though they might be motivated in other ways.

The idea of forcing people to participate, though alien to the concept of play, fits alongside the idea of having privacy from non-playing observers. Removing the sense that people are present who may disapprove, who would sit outside the playful frame and make players feel embarrassed, both approaches enable play in a similar way, but using different tools.

With all of the categories seeming to fit within the Goffmanian idea of a situation being framed in a particularly way, and with play often being a difficult, embarrassing frame to move into in many adult settings, it suggests the categories found above could be used as a starting point for giving adults permission to play. Using, and expanding upon, these categories, we could build a suite of approaches that may help to re-frame situations as being playful. There would be no “ideal” approach, or set process to follow, as each group and situation starts off in a different place and some categories may contradict each other. Instead the categories could be built upon to allow playful practitioners to select approaches that may be useful in enabling adult play and apply them in a way that suits the context in which they are operating.

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