

Play as Participation: Integrating an Attitude of Play in the Museum Space

This presentation investigates museums' use of play in the museum space as well as the implications of this. Furthermore, this presentation proposes ways in which theoretical reflection can shift the perception and incorporation of play in the museum setting, in ways that can promote visitor engagement, participation, and learning.

Much evidence suggests the complementary nature of play and learning, but museums often assume that learning about museum objects is inherent in the process of play. In the case of young children, museums tend to view play and learning as necessarily linked with one another; in other words, if children are playing in the museum, they must be learning. Although play embodies many characteristics that are linked with learning, play does not inherently indicate learning, but it *may* trigger engagement, participation, and learning.

People are evidently *engaged* in their activities in the museum through play. It is easy to see how museum scholars and practitioners would assume that play is an engrossing flow experience. Johan Huizinga (1940), most prominent scholar on play theory, describes one of the qualities of play in such a way that aligns with flow theory (even long before its conceptualisation): play proceeds “with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome ‘only’ feeling” (p. 8).

Play and playfulness also promote social interaction within the museum space. In the case of young children, children interact with one another and adult caregivers are also often implicated in these social interactions. As each visitor views museum exhibitions through her prior knowledge and experiences, each visitor will have a different experience in the museum; social interaction among visitors or within a group of visitors can help to develop further the learning experience for each visitor through participative knowledge construction.

Museums often perceive play as purely physical; however, the concept of play as developed by Johan Huizinga encompasses many different characteristics and can appear in many different forms. Participation in the museum space can be promoted if play is incorporated into the museum as a whole rather than denigrated to one area for young children, if play—in all of its varieties—is adopted as an attitude within the museum, and if play is used to promote social interaction.

I propose not only that museum use theoretical reflection to analyze critically their exhibition design, but that they embrace the broadness of Huizinga's theory of play. This abstract conception of play allows for boundless avenues of research and the incorporation of play in the museum setting in various forms for visitor young and old alike. Clearly, play is a way to stimulate public participation and engagement in the museum, but practitioners and academics should remain critical of the link between their learning or experiential goals and their application of play in practice.