

The Play *is* the Work

by [Sue Baechler](#) for Ludogogy Magazine, (March 2023)

The best games call on us to use our talent and imagination to play, learn and excel. So do the best workplaces.



I didn't start out making games. But I quickly recognized that play was the active ingredient in fostering workplace creativity, learning and change.

The first time I used play to solve a business problem, The Denver Post wrote a story about it and my boss tried to fire me for up-staging her. That's how I knew I had something of value. The next time I used play to solve a business problem, I created a P&L game for my retail managers. We broke sales and profitability records, and my boss took credit for making the game. Yup, I definitely had something of value.

A friend suggested I 'take my little treasures' and go make games and playful experiences to help other people solve their business problems. Be my own boss. Soon, I was watching hundreds of drugstore managers so deeply engaged in playing the [Bottom Line Game](#), they didn't want to leave for lunch. Later, the CEO pointed me out in the back of the room and said, "*I have never seen people rush back from lunch to play a learning game. Bravo!*"

This is when I started making games.

For three decades now, I've worked alongside creative colleagues and clients to design games and playful experiences that help people work and learn together in new ways to solve all kinds of business challenges in all kinds of industries. Serious challenges that can keep people and businesses from growing, like [innovating drug development](#), [leading organizational change](#), advancing selling skills, [reimagining product lines](#), [implementing strategy](#), changing culture, [managing projects](#), [growing revenues](#), mastering skills. To name a few.

My games (board & digital) and experiences (live & interactive) are largely custom-made for each client. I never make the same game or solve the same problem twice so I can keep learning, too. What *is* the same about every game and experience are these signature principles:

- Co-created with clients
- Self-facilitated by participants
- Collaborative *and* competitive
- Gameplay requires new behaviors
- Game named for higher purpose
- Engaging visual design

Recently, I wondered if my thirty years of game making - so far - held any lessons worth sharing with a wider audience of makers and users. I asked my nephew [Ryan Baechler](#) for his insight and he responded like he'd been thinking about it all his life. "Sue, when people play your games, the play *is* the work. To play, score and win is to learn, do, and change. That's what makes your games so valuable and unique."

The play *is* the work. Everyone should have a nephew like Ryan, who also happens to be a creative publishing and product development executive. I took this as a 'yes', so here are a few lessons in hopes that more people will make and use games and playful experiences to foster creativity, learning and change.

Lesson 1. It's play that helps us do serious things better.

I wish I'd said this, but it was [Jake Orlowitz](#), Wikipedia founder. Here's his whole thought: *"It's play that makes people unafraid to fail and confident to try new things. It's play that helps us do serious things better because we enjoy them and feel a sense of joy in our achievements."*

All the [games and experiences](#) I've made help people do serious things better. It's where the conversation starts with business leaders. *What do people need to learn and do to stay competitive? What do people have to know, feel and do to change behavior? What are they doing now? What's in the way of change happening? Who needs to work together to make these changes/improvements? What does a successful outcome look like?*

Once I know what the leaders think has to happen for the game experience to be productive, I go to the people whose behavior has to change. The game participants. I ask them the same questions so I know how to acknowledge what they already know and do, and fully engage them in the experience. Then, I design the game for the participants, knowing the leaders will get what they want.

For example, a biotech company was competing for top talent and competitive advantage. Specifically, their drug developers needed to work more creatively and collaboratively so that new drugs could be discovered and delivered to patients faster and better. Nothing is more serious than that. When I questioned leaders and participants, they all embraced the business goals and behavior change. They

wanted a game experience that engaged them in the whole system of drug development (not just their function or role) so they could better understand how they could be more creative and influential. They wanted to try out new behaviors in the game, see the impact on patients, collaborate outside their silos and make real progress together to accelerate behavior change. We named the game Ring That Bell after the symbolic ‘bell ringing’ at the FDA when a new drug is approved. The ultimate ‘win’ for all drug developers.

Take a look at [Ring That Bell](#).

“It’s play that helps us do serious things better.”

Lesson 2. Games are transforming the way people work and learn

Transformation is change. And, it’s what the best games do best. Behavior change during and beyond game play is what I strive to achieve with every new game and playful experience. [Jesse Schell](#), owner of [Schell Games](#) and Carnegie Mellon University professor called out this higher purpose of games in his book [The Art of Game Design](#), saying that *“games are on the verge of transforming the way people work and learn in the same ways they already change consumer behavior.”*

Those of us who make games that are intended to change behavior, know that all games are not the same. *Will it be like Monopoly?* the hotel executive asked me as we discussed how we would empower guest services people in a new game. *We imagine it working like Oregon Trail*, the scientists told me as we talked through

how people would learn new ways to work together. In my experience, the best games and playful experiences are co-created with client teams who start with what they know and like about consumer games they've played, and leap to a whole new level of expectations as they realize the transforming potential of games and play.

Sometimes it takes an outsider to describe what games and play can achieve in an organization. Here's what [Alan M. Webber](#), co-founder of Fast Company Magazine wrote about the games and playful experiences my team designed to transform how people work and learn at Xerox. *“XBS’s approach to change is dramatically different from most others. There’s no senior change team, no formal change program, no big-budget activities, no specific performance goals. Instead, the mind-set is experimental, inclusive, organic, almost playful. Through a seemingly endless series of simulations, seminars, events, and experiences — all carefully designed to reinforce a simple message to employees about the value of learning — XBS has created an environment that not only produces business results but also supports personal growth.”*

In another example of taking leaps to transform how people work and learn together, a client team told me how they needed a new way to teach their 350+ consultants how to sell services and grow revenues during their annual 48-hour sales meeting. Their mantra was ‘bigger, farther and faster’. I asked, *“What if you brought your clients and consultants together in a live, interactive learning experience to discover more potent ways to accelerate growth? Everyone could learn, do and change together in real time. And, what if the clients paid for the experience?”* It was a bold idea, yes, but well within the transforming power of

gameplay. We invented the large game-like experience, named it BiFF (Bigger, Farther, Faster), it was a success, the clients came and they did pay for it.

[Mavericks at Work](#) co-author and speaker [Polly LaBarre](#), who hosted the live BiFF event, said “*You should be thrilled with your evolution in event design and ‘work’. What a success!*” Leadership development coach [Judy Dubin](#), who facilitated one of the consultant/client groups said, “*Your [BiFF Event](#) was quite simply spectacular - bringing to life the incredible concept of teaching and learning with the client. Groundbreaking. Courageous.*”

Not everyone on the client team was convinced up front that a playful, fun, game-like experience could change how consultants sell and increase revenues. In fact, some did not participate much in the planning and execution, just in case it was a failure. As my journalist friend and performance strategist [Joe Robinson](#) says with a wink “*Grownups have responsibilities -- problems -- for crying out loud. They can’t have fun while learning.*” But, when the CEO’s of six client companies stood up at the end of the event to describe how they’d been ‘BiFFed’ - one even declaring out loud he would re-engage the consultancy - everyone took credit for the success. They even deemed BiFF a ‘powerful competitive advantage’ and turned it into a [continuing education program](#) -- *for crying out loud.*

Take a look at [BiFF](#) (Bigger, Farther, Faster)

“Games are transforming the way people work and learn.”

Lesson 3. Why those who play, win.

How do you know the game is going to work?

Not everyone likes playing games.

Games don't seem serious enough for adult learning.

We don't play games in our company.

When you say games, do you mean like Jeopardy? Or ice breaker exercises?

I still hear resistance like this when the topic of games for learning and change comes up. And, it can be a good place to start a conversation about why those who play, win. But, it's more and more likely now that I hear:

We're excited about using a gaming approach.

We sketched out a game idea and want you to help us make it.

A game would get more creative results than what we're doing now.

Teach us how to make a game while we're co-creating the game.

In an [article](#) I contributed to for People and Strategy Magazine, about how games improve performance and results, my game-maker and learning mentor [Dr. Michael Carter](#) explained why those who play, win.

“In some cases, a game’s critical ingredient is simply the suspension of disbelief: Players enter an environment that prompts them to make choices, solve puzzles and generate original solutions. The value-add to a real situation is the license to fail, the no-fault nature of gameplay — it’s great to win but not really fatal to make a mistake, which, after all, is one of the best ways to learn something so you’ll never forget it.

In other cases, the special sauce is the teamwork, where players learn to gauge each others' value to the effort and judge whom best to rely on at critical junctures.

In all cases, a game is about play, learning and trying to excel. As such, it draws as deeply as possible from those who engage.”

Speaking of games that draw deeply from those who engage, I recently co-developed a commercial game with people strategist [Brenda Hardesty](#) and [Focus Games](#). [All In Game](#) is a better way to plan and solve problems together. It's an online, ideas-to-actions game designed for hybrid working. In 90 minutes, any group, anywhere, can create individual action plans that help them achieve a shared purpose like implementing a strategy, creating alignment, developing a plan, defining culture, delivering results, accelerating innovation. It makes planning more engaging, enjoyable and effective by turning everyone's ideas into actions.

Take a look at [All In Game](#). “*Why those who play, win.*”

Games aren't magic. But they are compelling. As game co-creator, friend and creativity expert [Dr. Steven Kowalski](#) points out: “*No wonder business professionals are leveraging gaming design principles and mechanics in everything from executive development to performance management and goal*

setting, to even the budgeting process. Gaming technologies rely on the small wins -- and often sudden leaps -- in achievement and skill.”

As you game makers and players know, it takes *thoughtful design and a genuine enthusiasm for people* to create game frameworks that trust players’ emotions, creativity and motivations to work, learn and change together to achieve a goal. In front of each other. In a work setting.

But, when the play *is* the work, it works.



[Sue Baechler](#) has a playful mindset. It's her personal *and* business strategy.

As a kid Sue created backyard carnivals to showcase everyone's originality. In college she built a playground for handicapped kids. As a camp counselor, she wrote interactive songs and plays that helped kids connect. As a volunteer she got Chicago Bears stars to dress up like their cheerleaders at her Special Olympics fundraising event. As a business leader, she turned challenges into songs, games, movies, stories and even apparel to unite people in creating positive change. So, it's not surprising that Sue's company, [Originaliti](#), invents custom games that help people in all industries play their way into better relationships and results by solving their own challenges in companies like Deloitte, Hilton, Hallmark, CVS, Genentech, H&R Block, Xerox and GE. Originaliti's games for global brands have been featured in Forbes, Fast Company, CNN, Huffington Post, People & Strategy and The Wall Street Journal. Before Originaliti, Sue was a business leader for Lens Crafters in California, Osco Drug in Chicago, Melville in Boston and New York, and two Silicon Valley start-ups. Sue's BA in Communication and Education Design for Adults & Children from Buckminster Fuller's School of Design at Southern Illinois University is a special major she invented to study across the schools of design, graphic arts, education, communications and multimedia.

Sue believes everyone has a playful mindset. *Don't like the status quo?* Just ask: *How could play make this more enjoyable?* Then, try something (anything) playful and watch the positive emotions and connections flow.