
The Nature of Play

An Overview



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This essay describes a range of perspectives and concerns that inform scholarly understandings of play. Along the way, the author explores issues and controversies within a series of five questions: What kind of “thing” is play? Is play morally good? Is play functional? Is play rational? Is play more “free” than other human activities? After describing the diversity of opinion about the subject and noting that play scholars typically reach some sort of working definition for play, the author pays particular attention to the work of Brian Sutton-Smith. The author then offers his own conclusions concerning the nature of play. Following Johan Huizinga, he understands play as either a pattern of individual action or a pattern of interaction, the first distinguished by its qualities of transformation and consummation, the second by contests and unpredictable outcomes. However, any definition of play, he cautions, should celebrate the diversity outlined here.

WHAT DO THE FOLLOWING activities have in common? Throwing snowballs with a group of friends. Building a sandcastle. Playing a kissing game at a middle school party. Saying a tongue twister faster and faster. Finger painting. Taking a swing at a moving ball. “Strutting your stuff” on a dance floor. Telling a joke. Pulling a prank. Dressing up in crazy clothes. Wagering at a casino or racetrack. Making your doll do whatever you want. Surfing. Fantasizing about someone romantically. Doing a crossword puzzle. Holding your breath longer than you have before. Teasing your younger brother. “Bluffing” in a game of poker. Collecting ceramic frogs. Making the biggest splash possible at a public swimming pool.

All of the above activities are forms of play—or at least play as most people understand that term. For scholars, however, deciding what activities should be called “play” or deciding what qualities make activity of any sort “playful” are much more problematic. Consider a few of the examples just provided. Throwing snowballs is surely a winter escapade, a picture-perfect moment expressing a child’s triumph over inclement circumstances. But what if some kids gang

up on one youngster, start throwing too hard at close range, or even pack their snowballs with rocks? Turn to the second example. Is it still play if our castle-builder must follow the directions of some authority figure—say a bossy older child or an overly instructive adult—rather than pursue her own inspirations? The third example suggests further difficulties yet. Is a kissing game still play if the participants feel themselves forced to participate, if they are painfully embarrassed by the proceedings, or if they find that some players are pushing matters beyond declared boundaries? Indeed, all the examples presented above can turn—sometimes in an instant—into activities most people would not identify as play. Wagering at a casino or track can become desperate. Pulling a prank or teasing someone can be mean-spirited and hurtful. Collecting ceramic frogs, like every other pursuit, can prove compulsive. Holding your breath can be spiteful, a way of worrying others and of trying to get your own way.

It seems apparent that a simple list of “playful” activities—however charming—is not sufficient to understand the nature and significance of play. To be sure, something about the above examples—at least in their more socially respectable or romanticized versions—encourages most of us to think of these activities as play. But what is that “something,” what is that set of commonly shared traits that leads us to so sure a conclusion? Identifying such traits lies at the heart of the following essay.

Defining Play: Issues and Controversies

Precisely because play has been such an important aspect of human life, many scholars have attempted to define the nature and significance of play, and several notable books have gathered together those accounts. Not surprisingly, most of the scholars included in those books have been proponents of play. Consistently, they say play contributes in some fashion to broader patterns of individual and social behavior or to idealized versions of those behaviors.

Three classic syntheses of the various theories of play are Susanna Millar’s 1968 *The Psychology of Play*, Michael Ellis’s 1973 *Why People Play*, and Joseph Levy’s 1978 *Play Behavior*. Although these tend to emphasize the contributions of psychologists, they also include the viewpoints of classic and early modern philosophers, educational theorists, and students of animal behavior. Also valuable is Mihai Spariosu’s 1989 *Dionysus Reborn*, which considers older, pre-Socratic views of play and then traces those ideas in the treatments

of modern philosophers and literary theorists. Brian Sutton-Smith in his 1997 *The Ambiguity of Play* takes an even broader approach. Sutton-Smith assembles literally hundreds of play studies into seven distinctive approaches or “rhetorics,” which I will describe later.

Clearly, understandings of play vary widely. However, it is probably fair to say that most theories of human play associate play with the freedom of human beings to express themselves openly and to render creatively the conditions of their lives. In that sense, play is often considered to be a respite from the necessities of life, a stretch in time when the normal affairs of the world are suspended. Compared to those moments when people are virtually prisoners of their daily routines, people at play are said to have broken free to conjure new possibilities of being and, even more importantly, to test the implications of those possibilities in protected forms of behavior. To play is to create and then to inhabit a distinctive world of one’s own making.

I will not attempt to review all the various theories of play; the books cited above better serve that purpose. Instead, let me comment on some of the different aspects of play that are apparent in any attempt to think about this matter. To focus that discussion, I rely on one of the greatest books on the subject of play, Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.

First published in 1938, Huizinga’s work focuses both on the nature of play and on its changing significance in European societies from the classical period to modern times. The best known element of *Homo Ludens* is Huizinga’s statement of five defining characteristics of play. First, play is a relatively free or voluntary activity in which people set the terms and timing of their own involvement. Second, play is distinguished from routine affairs by its absence of material consequences. Third, play is separated from other activities by its use of exotic rules, playing spaces, ideas of time, costumes, and equipment. Fourth, play is marked by the way in which it both honors rules and yet encourages transgression and disorder. And fifth, play promotes the banding together of participants in “secret” or otherwise outlandish societies.

Although Huizinga’s description remains central to play studies, his examples of play and his treatment of play’s development are somewhat specialized and even controversial. His interest in the play of adults rather than of children seems unusual for a play scholar, and he was oddly disinterested in solitary play, which he felt had little cultural significance. His work focuses almost exclusively on the role of the social contest (or *agon*) in European history rather than on the many other forms of play. As Margaret Duncan (1988)

has emphasized, Huizinga's approach partakes of an older style of historical analysis that was especially attentive to the exploits of the powerful (routinely, upper-class males) and rather inattentive to the practices of other categories of people. Still, his thesis—that public competitions between socially prominent individuals and groups both defined the spirit of historical periods and also led to cultural change and refinement—remains a fascinating, if largely unproven, account of how societies change.

Although Huizinga's interest in play was specialized, he also expanded the territory within which play scholars operate. For example, Huizinga argued effectively that the play spirit runs through most of society's institutions. Thus, courts of law, debating societies, sports arenas, philosophic symposia, public competitions of song and insult, and so forth have functioned historically as "playgrounds," where people vied with one another and attempted to refine their own capabilities. Although Huizinga emphasized the degree to which play is frequently divorced from routine social affairs, he did not envision play as a distinct sphere of social life. Quite the opposite, he held play to be a spirit or attitude that distinguished the public life of earlier centuries. Even more dramatically, he thought play to be a barrier to the unremarked passing of ordinary events. Thus, play allowed people to seize certain moments and then reconfigure them in fanciful ways. Huizinga was interested especially in the relationship of play to the public festivals and religious rites that were central elements in the social life of earlier times. Understanding the significance of what he called the "play-festival-rite" complex and attempting to separate play from those other two activities were major elements of his book.

I have presented Huizinga's ideas at some length here not because his approach (or any other) is the "proper" way to understand play, but because his views take into consideration many of the issues that confront any scholar who wishes to determine play's characteristics. Indeed, most of Huizinga's answers to these important questions have invited contrasting viewpoints from other students of play.

What kind of "thing" is play?

In the field of human studies, any subject that has far-reaching significance—war, crime, poverty, love, religion—tends to be difficult to define. Certainly, this is the case with play. Part of that difficulty comes from the fact that play proves often a subtle, elusive phenomenon that seems to appear without notice and then disappear just as quickly. Two people can be hard at work and suddenly

move into a play mode that has a different “feel” or quality from what they were doing before. A moment later, they “settle down,” and the play moment is gone. Although some readers may take the view of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who said that he could not define pornography but that he knew it when he saw it, such an approach is not adequate for play scholars. In play, there are always many different aspects of human behavior and relationships to consider, and it is sometimes a puzzle which of these aspects should be central in a definition of play.

For his part, Huizinga was uncertain whether to see play as a quality of “action” (that is, some pattern of individual behavior) or instead as an “activity” or “interaction” (that is, as some more general pattern that takes into account all the different players and even the objects with which they are playing). Psychologists and educational theorists have tended to see play in the first way, that is, as something individuals do. In that sense, people “play” tennis or cards. The psychologist Jean Piaget defined play as a distinctive way in which people operate in the world. For Piaget (1962), play is a form of “assimilation,” when people try to impose their own personal ideas and behavioral strategies on the world. Although most of life features continual adjustments by the person to the demands of the world, play—in Piaget’s view—is different. When people play, they try out their own schemes on objects of every description and derive the satisfaction of seeing the effectiveness of those schemes. To that extent, play is a project of personal control or self-direction, a way of building needed skills and acquiring the confidence to use those skills in wider situations.

Although scholars of animal behavior must judge whether creatures are playing on the basis of their external mannerisms alone, scholars of human behavior can ask how people feel about their actions. Indeed, many psychological theories of play focus on the attitudes of people toward their play or on the more general mental and emotional processes that seem to be involved in this process. Certainly, this is the case in Piaget’s “cognitive” approach to play. But it is also evident in the psychoanalytic tradition, where scholars such as Erik Erikson (1950) use play as a window that makes visible what people are thinking and feeling. In that light, play is sometimes seen as an attempt at ego mastery, that is, as a project in which people create a largely artificial world so that they can experience and manage different kinds of feelings.

Such approaches entail the belief that play is something people do in situations of every type. That is, we turn situations into play by acting in certain ways. Nina Lieberman (1977) has extended this view by arguing that certain

types of people are perhaps more “playful” than others. Thus, in a group of young children, some seem to be able to play more quickly and easily than others. What these playful students bring to their own lives is a set of dispositions: spontaneity, energy, enthusiasm, wit, and social engagement. In other words, play of all types seems to feature what the anthropologist Helen Schwartzman (1978) termed “transformative” orientations. Players try to form, de-form, and re-form circumstances in accordance with their own fascinations. Some people—and some societies—play more readily than others.

I have described play as a pattern of behavior, or as a spirit or disposition that shapes that behavior. Some see play as a quality of experience, something people feel while they are playing. Psychologist Daniel Berlyne (1960) argues that creatures at play are committed to attaining certain levels of excitement or arousal. Play behaviors effectively develop, process, and expend this excitement. Such a viewpoint is important because it makes clear that play is not simply a mental activity but one that also involves physical and emotional activities as well. That is, play is usually felt to be exciting or “fun.”

The nature of personal experience in play has also been central to the work of human development scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi (1975; 1990) has argued that people at play frequently attain a level of experience that he calls “flow,” when they become so deeply involved in what they are doing that they lose track of such typical concerns as time of day, external happenings, personal anxieties, and even the sense that they are separate from the situations in which they are acting. In such a viewpoint, play is less an orientation that people bring to situations of every type than it is a satisfying experience that results when the player’s skills and commitments mesh almost perfectly with the situations in which they find themselves. Players, in Csikszentmihalyi’s view, are enticed—and entranced—by appropriate levels of challenge.

Focusing on what individuals do and experience while they are playing—and calling those patterns “play”—is clearly an appropriate way of defining that phenomenon. However, play can also be seen as an “activity” or “interaction,” that is, as a wider pattern of relationship or interaction between all the elements that are “in play” at any one time. To think of play in this way is to suggest that play may also be seen as a social or cultural “form.” Although Huizinga was committed to the idea of playfulness as a spirit or orientation within societies, he also emphasized that those same societies historically have maintained frameworks—sometimes involving carefully protected times and spaces—to encourage playful behaviors. Clearly, such is the case with “games,” which are

cultural formats that help people interact in defined ways and ensure the continuity of play across time and space. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) called these models for behavior “frames.” In that sense, play (as opposed to work, religious ritual, “real” fights, etc.) is a broad cultural arena where people learn to recognize, anticipate, and orient themselves. And there are more specific kinds of play—jokes, daydreams, contests—that we also understand. We “play” when we participate in these cultural forms.

However, play (and games) also has a different meaning. When people talk of “games” they can mean the cultural formats referred to above—involving playing rules, beliefs about the nature and significance of the activity, the tradition or history of the activity, and so forth—but they can also mean an actual event or instance of that form. In other words, “the game of baseball” (the guidelines for activity of that type) is different from “a baseball game” (involving particular people at a set time and place). In the latter sense, play can be thought of as something that occurs when people get together or, more generally, as a momentary relationship that exists between play elements, such as between a boy and his dog or a rock climber and the cliff she is climbing. For such reasons, scholars such as Brian Sutton-Smith (1978) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) have seen play as a dialectical or dialogical activity, that is, as a kind of interactive process between a person (or persons) and the elements of the world. That interaction is filled with various kinds of improbability, excitement, and challenge, for no participant can predict precisely just where the play event will lead or what meanings will be discovered along the way. So understood, play is a dynamic, ever-changing *process* that is filled with ambiguity and surprise. That sense of joyous involvement and even wonder are the experiences promoted by the settings at the new Strong National Museum of Play. The museum’s Field of Play exhibit denoting the “elements of play” identifies many of those emotional possibilities.

This shift in perspective is important because it suggests that play is not just something people do “to” the world but is instead a broader event that people play “in.” Postmodernist scholars have extended this approach dramatically. Philosophers such as James S. Hans (1981) and Tilman Küchler (1994) have argued that the world itself is “at play” and that we are “in play” much more than we realize. If the moments of human existence are literally intersections of many different forms and forces (which are themselves the results of other kinds of cosmic intersections), then attempting to locate yourself in that swirling cosmos and moving about however you can is the “play” of life. In other

words, players must adjust to the world as much as they aspire to control its movements. And the rules we perceive and follow—in this largely literary or “narrative” viewpoint—are perhaps as artificial as those of a game of checkers or dominoes.

By this point, the reader may have concluded that there are so many different ways of looking at play that any general definition of the subject is impossible. After all, to this point play has been described as a pattern of individual behavior, as a “spirit” or orientation that people bring to their behavior, as a quality of experience that people have when they are in certain kinds of events, as the cultural rules or “frames” for those events, and even as the special patterns of real-time interactions that make up those events. Even more generally, play can be seen as some relatively predictable event or form or as the much more unpredictable processes that occur within that form. People can be said to play “with” or “at” the objects and relationships of the world, but they may also be “in” play. Finally, play occurs in many different settings and involves many different kinds of objects. People not only play with one another, they play with their own bodies and minds, with the elements of the physical environment, and even with cultural forms like ideas, norms, and language. Huizinga recognized all this and moved between these different viewpoints in his writing.

If this proliferation of possibilities seems daunting, I should emphasize that scholars examine human affairs of every type in all the same ways. Why should play be any different? Play has different qualities or aspects, and it is not surprising that different scholars choose to focus on one or more of these aspects in their studies. What seems important is not that any particular approach be declared superior to all the others but that those scholars recognize the relationship of their own studies to the work of others. That quality of insight should also be brought to the other questions that follow below.

Is play morally good?

Most scholars of play are also promoters of that activity. Play advocacy groups argue that play events represent critically important chances for people to express themselves creatively and emotionally in ways that differ from the often overly regulated (and overly scheduled) segments of our lives. Play is a chance for children—and adults—to develop themselves in accordance with their own ideals of what they should be. Play advocates believe strongly in human freedom and in the virtues that result when children are allowed to express themselves in relatively unfettered ways. Play scholars have tended to focus on play ac-

tivities that are constructive (rather than destructive) and socially appropriate (rather than deviant). To return to the examples at the beginning of the essay, most scholars focus on play as a fair and friendly snowball fight characterized by laughter and pleasurable excitement instead of as a fight that is nasty and hurtful. When children build a sandcastle in a cooperative or constructive way, the activity is typically declared to be play. When those same children run over or otherwise destroy the creations of others, observers are less inclined to use this term. Events where people and animals are humiliated or tortured—as in various forms of animal baiting—are even less likely to be emphasized in the play-studies literature.

Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne (1984) call these moralistic tendencies the “idealization” of play. Those who thus idealize play emphasize that contemporary play scholars and play advocates place their subject matter within a broader vision of how humans should conduct themselves and indeed will conduct themselves if left to their own devices. Such views usually align closely with their authors’ personal views of childhood and human development. If society sometimes taints or deadens what people can be, then play gives them a chance to relate to their world—and to one another—in relatively uncontaminated ways. Sutton-Smith (1997) discusses in another context how this viewpoint often connects to the idea that play is a vehicle for personal and social “progress.”

For his part, Huizinga was ambivalent about the relationship of play to moral order and moral development. On the one hand, he emphasizes a “very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order” (1955, 10). Rules typically are important parts of play, and players learn that to participate with one another effectively they must cooperate in the maintenance of this framework. But if play is commonly an exercise in moral order, it is also an occasion marked by tension, resistance, and disharmony that are the outcomes of self-assertion or partisanship. In other words, play activities seem to express—at the same time—qualities of social harmony and disharmony, cooperation and competition, rationality and nonrationality. And one person’s or one group’s version of the morally proper balance of these elements will vary from another’s. At any rate, Huizinga himself did not claim any moral superiority for play. As the last paragraph of *Homo Ludens* somewhat ruefully puts it, play in the final analysis “lies outside morals” and “in itself is neither good nor bad.” Play pursues neither truth nor justice but is instead a fundamentally aesthetic endeavor, a set of practices that explore the meanings of experience in a wide range of scenes and settings.

Is play functional?

The history of play studies is in some sense a history of the various attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of play for individuals and societies. In that history, functions triumph over dysfunctions; assets outweigh liabilities. For example, at the individual level, play is often said to give children (and the rest of us) a chance to develop socially useful ideas, values, skills, and relationships. In play, people grow emotionally, morally, and intellectually. Players are able to purge themselves of built-up tensions in acts of rejuvenation or recreation. They learn new strategies for dealing with the world. They experience the vicissitudes of success and failure and are strengthened by those experiences. At a wider and more abstract level, society itself, many claim, is made stronger through play. In play, group boundaries are established and enacted, values are clarified and reaffirmed, processes of intergroup negotiation are explored, hierarchies of skill and position are made public, qualities of leadership are developed, and so forth. As some say Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, famously remarked, the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.

Claims for the benefits of play are not limited to the individual and social realms. Indeed, ideas of form and function have been much more prominent in the biological sciences. Somewhat selectively, then, play has been seen as a benefit to physical as well as to mental health. Play routinely energizes people. It makes them aware of what their bodies and minds can (and cannot) do and sets them on the way to developing new capabilities. Pushing matters even further, play is sometimes held to be critical to the very survival of many species, including humans. By developing needed skills, creatures become more flexible and diverse and, so goes the argument, better prepared for the kinds of challenges they face in open, complicated, and changing environments. Some species, it seems, “need” to play and do so; others lead much more confined, focused lives and do not require play activities to aid their development.

Such claims for play’s positive consequences have perhaps been reactions to the hostility to play expressed historically by certain Protestant denominations and by the canons of an emerging industrial society that emphasized carefully administered labor. From that point of view, play—at least in its working-class manifestations—was held to be personally indulgent, socially distracting, morally pernicious, and even politically dangerous. If the proper business of life was self-advancement (a kind of pilgrim’s progress of secular and sacred improvement), then play was a falling backward into medievalism and even savagery. Given this powerfully established idea system, many of the early champions of

play were, not surprisingly, educational and moral theorists who claimed that play was not simply a waste of time. To the contrary, play was the mechanism by which students were energized and informed, soldiers readied for battle, communities recommitted to one another. Although the new play theorists did not support many of the old forms of play (for example, animal baiting, gambling, tavern games, and various public festivals), they did emphasize the value of new, socially administered forms, including ball play. For them, play was not the enemy of education and public improvement but instead its powerful ally (See Henricks 1991).

For his part, Huizinga eschewed functionalist explanations of play. For him, play's ultimate driving force was the sense of satisfaction, excitement, and even "fun" it provided. Nevertheless, he too was drawn to a view that certain kinds of play were critical to social and cultural development. Play, according to his central thesis, has been an engine of history. Significantly, however, he touted the virtues of the more open, festival-based forms of play that the modern reformers shunned. For Huizinga, the contemporary era had been crippled by bureaucratic, industrial practices that threatened to make play serious, prosaic, efficient, and functional. In Huizinga's view, players must be allowed to control their own play. Too much regulation—by schools, governments, and businesses—destroys the play spirit.

Whatever Huizinga's reflections, it does seem apparent that play may have its dysfunctions as well as its functions. Play can distract people from urgent duties, encourage self-indulgence, and overemphasize aesthetic concerns to the detriment of cognitive or moral ones. As I noted earlier, most forms of play can be pursued excessively, and some forms—such as violent video games, Internet poker, and drinking contests—seem to have few if any positive consequences. Even animal play may be dysfunctional as well as functional, for creatures at play are surely less attentive to predators and other forms of danger. Perhaps even more important, touting the functionality of play is an empty exercise unless you compare the consequences of play to the kinds of effects produced by participation in rival forms of activity such as work or ritual. Play may well be functional for personal or social development, but is it possible that other activities "do the job" just as well? For scholars, then, the challenge is to understand which aspects or qualities of play promote which kinds of effects in players and their sponsoring groups.

None of this denies the potential utility of play in helping individuals (and societies) understand who they are and what the implications of different be-

haviors may be. Play is, as many writers have put it, a laboratory of the possible, and that laboratory is surely helpful to the development of both children and adults. Still, what people do in that laboratory can be morally, intellectually, and emotionally problematic.

Is play rational?

If play's connection to morality is arguably tenuous, what is its connection to the thinking, calculating qualities of people? Are playful activities a special chance for the mind to exercise its powers of conscious apprehension and manipulation? Huizinga's response to that question stands within a long philosophical tradition often traced to Socrates and Plato. In that tradition, humans are thought to be different from other species of animals in the sense that they can step back from and ponder abstractly the circumstances of their lives. The distance between thought and action—and even more profoundly, between determinism and freedom—is the groundwork of human possibility. People are able to think and communicate about past, present, and future; they can envision rarely enacted “ideals” and try to transform those ideals into realities. Even more generally, people have the ability to create abstract models of the world and then to measure the quality of their own lives against those models. For Huizinga, then, play is a celebration of human rationality, an occasion when, as he famously puts it, “an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos” (1955, 3). It is a time when people not only express themselves but also build models for what the world can be.

Mihai Spariosu's *Dionysus Reborn* presents a different viewpoint. Pre-Socratic wisdom traditions and many non-western societies did not much prize the belief that a person should be emotionally controlled and intellectually calculating like some kind of eviscerated thinking machine. Instead, pre-Socratic traditions celebrated the socially engaged partisan who fought for the prominence of his group in an unsettled and unprincipled universe. In such a worldview, play expresses a will to power—an idea subsequently much explored by Friedrich Nietzsche. People feel the rush of the world inside themselves. Attuned to those conditions, play attempts not just to control and contemplate but also to experience vitality and movement. For such reasons, play often seems semi-chaotic, compulsive, excessive, and socially unfair. People play to claim a position—and to indulge their feelings—in the ever-changing circumstances of the moment.

Clearly, these are somewhat different visions of the nature and purposes of

rational thought, in play or elsewhere. I do not mean to suggest that one or the other of these positions is correct but rather to indicate that views of play—like views of other matters—sit within the idea systems of their makers.

Is play more “free” than other human activities?

A cornerstone of many theories of play is the belief that play provides more numerous opportunities for personally controlled expression than can be found in other domains of human experience. Huizinga himself championed this view.

Play does seem to be free in two senses. On the one hand, play is commonly cut off from the customary interferences of society. Players feel themselves at ease and are able to focus on certain matters that are placed before them—often, existential dilemmas that have been “miniaturized” or otherwise ridded of their dangers. In other words, players sense a “freedom from” external control. On the other hand, inside the playground itself players may feel themselves more in control of their environment than they typically would. As I argue elsewhere (Henricks 1999), players have an unusual opportunity to enter and exit the playground at will, start and stop action sequences, interrupt or reinitiate those sequences, or even engage in behaviors generally considered to be “spontaneous.” In other words, play expands people’s sense of their “freedom to” accomplish certain things. In play we can “be ourselves” in imaginative and expansive ways.

This view has its critics. Focusing especially on formally organized play, such as spectator sports, casino gambling, beauty pageants, and bridge tournaments, many scholars have noted that these events are frequently controlled by non-playing administrators and follow procedures that maximize the benefits for the sponsors they represent. Huizinga termed activities of this type “false” play. Participants in such events may or may not believe that they are controlling the pattern and pace of their activity, but in reality the outlines of their behavior have been determined well in advance.

Similarly, many forms of play are clearly not the isolated reserves Huizinga envisioned. The prejudices, problems, and social distinctions of the broader society regularly make their way into the playground. Indeed, Huizinga emphasized that the more organized forms of play are routinely a *display* of some valued social theme or skill or a *contest* for some designated social reward. Although he recognized the importance of these goals and incentives, he strongly opposed the idea of material rewards as extrinsic motivators of play. However, other writers

have emphasized that play is often “sweetened” by just these sorts of bets, bribes, and payments. Seen in this light, play is arguably just as constrained—and as contaminated—as other social forms.

Such challenges to the integrity or purity of play turn on the issue of what kinds of activities we call play. If one takes a very broad view of play—and, for example, includes all the things that happen at a costume party, a baseball game, a high school dance, a fishing tournament—then clearly numerous kinds of personal and social constraints and incentives impinge on those activities. Indeed, as Roger Caillois (1961) emphasized, all publicly recognized games by definition involve explicit rules that constrain the behavior of the participants. Huizinga’s view (and mine) is that we should see play instead as what social scientists term an “ideal type,” that is, as a distinctive form or *model for* behavior that can be used to judge the character of real-life events. Only then can we decide whether an activity in question is “false” or “true” play, whether it is more or less “playful,” or even how it is being altered by the organizations that control it. Once again, these themes are central to Huizinga’s book.

My point is not that these different viewpoints suggest a widespread confusion within the scholarly community regarding the nature of play, but rather that play can be viewed in different lights, can be organized in different ways, and can be applied to different purposes. If play is not inherently moral, it can be turned to moral (or immoral) purposes. Play may well be a showcase for the nonrational and emotional aspects of life, but it can also be a time for intensely rational calculation. Some play activities celebrate spontaneous, “free” expression; others are more regulated and formal. Players may pursue excitement, tension, and novelty of experience; they may also seek familiarity and assurance. Play can assist the development of our cognitive, emotional, and moral abilities; it can also be lackadaisical and profoundly self-indulgent. Play’s mutability is also its promise. Play scholars and play advocates must recognize the implications of all the different versions of their chosen subject and support what forms seem most appropriate to their societies.

Play in Academia

Although you might imagine that individual scholars reach their own conclusions about the nature of play and then move ahead accordingly, such is not the case. The academic world is perhaps less a gathering of individuals than a

social and cultural configuration. Scholars operate within the frameworks of their societies, communities, universities, departments, and professional associations. Most importantly perhaps, these scholars are both the products and the representatives of their academic disciplines. As students, they are exposed to limited subject matters, ideas, and methodologies; as graduates, they maintain relationships with others who have been similarly trained; as teachers, authors, and policy advocates, they disseminate those ideas to the wider community. Like other portions of the modern world, academia is highly specialized, and scholars find that to succeed they must present themselves as members-in-good-standing of disciplines, of distinctive fields of study within those disciplines, and even of well-established schools of thought within those fields.

This division of labor has special pertinence for the study of play. For play studies constitutes not an academic discipline but rather an interdiscipline or multidiscipline. In other words, few academic departments (themselves almost always organized along disciplinary lines) are devoted to the study of play. As a result, professional organizations like the Association for the Study of Play and the International Play Association and new centers of study and advocacy like the Strong National Museum of Play are critically important.

Even in such settings, however, research on play is bounded sharply by the professional commitments and exposures of scholars. Play conferences welcome wide varieties of scholarship; less clearly do they integrate the different approaches. The current section of this essay will comment briefly on two ways in which play scholarship is specialized: by *academic discipline* and by *ideological commitment*.

Play and the discipline

A play-studies conference resembles a banquet attended by many different kinds of guests or, perhaps more appositely, a church supper composed of the homemade offerings of the attendees. In that mix, some kinds of food are over-represented, others are absent entirely. The quality of the offerings varies; some dishes are devoured greedily and others merely picked at. The guests are united by a broad commitment to the common enterprise that makes the gathering possible and by a determination to treat one another amicably. And not unlike the church supper, the dishes themselves are somewhat predictable. The contributions of established community members are anticipated to be of a certain character; however, even newcomers are expected to operate within the purviews of their disciplines.

Most prominent among the contributors to the play studies banquet are the representatives from psychology, education, and human development. Psychologists, not surprisingly, focus on the actions, orientations, and experiences of individual players. If play has “causes” or “functions,” they are to be found within these players. For psychologists, then, play is a kind of consultative activity that addresses and monitors the personally maintained patterns—moral, cognitive, and emotional—that guide our private lives.

Education scholars, especially those who study early childhood, have been great champions of the more idealized forms of play (see Friedrich Froebel 1887). However, their principal concern is probably less play itself than the project of human learning or socialization. They see play—at least certain types of play—as a vehicle that helps people attain new (and commonly more comprehensive and effective) levels of skill, knowledge, and value commitment. Even more broadly, the interdisciplinary nature of human development connects play to ideas of personal maturation and “progress.” Although scholars in all three of these fields recognize the role of other people in helping us become our more powerful and “better” selves, they place special attention on the ways in which individuals themselves are able to shore up their identities—and then move ahead—through play.

Such themes are also central to the subfield of education that focuses on physical development and in the study of sport and leisure. Scholars in these areas have been especially sensitive to the effects of formal or bureaucratic organization on play activities. They argue that informal play, controlled by the players themselves, imparts rather different lessons (and promotes somewhat different experiences) than play controlled by nonplaying administrators.

Other disciplines emphasize the specifically social and cultural aspects of play. Anthropology has been a key discipline for understanding the role of play in the lives of adults as well as children. In any society, play activities are channeled by cultural forms—specific types of games, public festivals, ritually observed practices, and the like. Typically, we “choose” to play within those forms. The particular forms of play people select may be explained better by social factors (i.e., the requirements and goals of groups) than by personality. Human play explores people’s understandings of the world in socially regulated ways.

Similar themes abound in sociological studies of play, which focus even more intensively on the positions and practices of the playground. For sociologists, players occupy distinctive roles: They explore hierarchy; they consider the

meanings of group identity; they organize themselves in ways that transcend the playground. More generally, they set the play-world in a broader world characterized by groups, communities, and society. They take some themes from that wider world (so that play is a “mirror” of society), turn some into their opposites (so that play is “anti-structure”), and develop some more or less independently (so that the play-world is a self-styled “alternative” to the more typical contexts for experience).

That play can have many different meanings is also a prominent theme in folklore studies. Focusing especially on the oral traditions—songs, stories, nursery rhymes, street games—of human communities, folklorists (see Sutton-Smith et al. 1995) have shown that play can be a scene of wild, socially creative imagining as well as a place where traditional patterns prevail. Children’s play, in particular, can be a place where socially disapproved fascinations—including aggressive and sexual curiosities—can be made public. For the folklorist, then, play is a meeting place between the disorderly and the orderly, between the natural curiosity all of us share to see what we can do to the world and the awareness that the world is powerful and presents limitations that we must recognize.

Another important tradition of play research has focused on animal behavior. As researchers like Robert Fagen (1981) have shown, many species of animals engage in patterns that resemble the play of humans. They isolate narrow sequences of behavior and then repeat those sequences in frequently exaggerated ways. These actions are characterized by distinctive “play-faces” and by other gestures recognizable to their playmates. These specialized gestures signify that the ensuing behavior will follow a definite but unusual course in which the playmates may switch roles as dominant or subordinate and actions will be started and stopped, started and stopped again. The pattern and pace of the activity seems to represent the willful consent of the participants. The scientific analysis of these patterns is important not only for understanding the ways in which distinctive species of animals develop and interact but also for helping scholars understand the biological and evolutionary foundations of human play.

Yet another tradition has been research in the humanities. Historians, like Huizinga, have revealed that the history of play is not only a record of the different toys, games, and activities that have been prominent in different societies over time but also of the changing meaning of these play forms in those societies. Similarly, the disciplines of philosophy and literature have focused on the ways in which play has been conceptualized. Most broadly then, the disciplines of

the humanities make people confront the deepest meanings of existence, those that are culture-bound and those that transcend considerations of time and place. Whatever its cultural variations, play is one of the fundamental modes of human relating.

Play as ideology

Play scholars typically reach some set of working definitions about their subject matter. That is, they decide whether to see play as free or constrained, rational or nonrational, about mind or about body, a form or a process, experiential or behavioral, functional or dysfunctional, and so forth. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) has argued that the answers to these questions tend to be gathered into well-established traditions or schools of thought. These approaches operate as cultural perspectives or lenses that encourage their practitioners to focus on certain kinds of play (which the approach seems to describe well) and discourage other kinds of inquiry. Sutton-Smith describes these traditions as “rhetorics” or “ideologies.”

Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play* focuses on seven such rhetorics, among them one he calls the “rhetoric of progress.” As I noted earlier, many scholars—especially from the disciplines of psychology and education—have emphasized the degree to which play contributes to the intellectual, emotional, and moral growth of the young. In play, we explore possible pathways into the future. Our movement along these pathways helps us build a wide range of skills and suggests to us what skills can be used effectively in what settings. Sutton-Smith emphasizes that this approach is also central to animal behavior studies, where play seems to be concentrated in species that have relatively long maturations and within those species, among individuals who are young.

The notion that play promotes progress or growth is perhaps more powerfully established than any other in play studies. Still, it is only one view. Almost entirely opposite is the “rhetoric of fate.” Sharing something with the postmodernism I mentioned earlier, this rhetoric sees play as an experience of the forces—often apparently incomprehensible or random—that surround our lives. As in gambling, we try to control these forces with all the charm and ingenuity we can summon, but play willingly dives into the uncertainties of life. Although part of us wishes to control our own progress (as in the previous rhetoric), another wishes to feel the touch of fate on our shoulder, to know—by winning, by being blessed with luck—that we are not alone in the universe.

A third Sutton-Smith rhetoric, “power,” found expression back in Huizinga’s writing. Play is often envisioned as a kind of battle or contest. Typically, as for

Huizinga, this confrontation occurs between individuals or groups who struggle to advance their own social and cultural positions. Players can also contest their standings against other kinds of forces—against wind, against weather, against gravity, against their own physical capabilities. Play, in other words, is set within a picture of life as an endless series of oppositions. Against such external (and sometimes internal) forces, one must fight. Play activities then are a way of sharpening swords or of developing war plans for life's difficulties. It's a notion of play long championed by the leaders of formally organized sports.

In sharp contrast comes a fourth rhetoric—community “identity.” Play appears as a gathering together of people in like-minded pursuit. In other words, play does not divide people as much as it integrates them into wider social and cultural wholes. Not surprisingly, social historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have been the major proponents of this view. Play—including many kinds of community celebrations and dramatic displays—is something that people of all ages do to proclaim the nature of their allegiances and the values that unite them. Although they are quite different, the rhetorics of power and identity sometimes combine, as when contests are both a contributor to in-group identity and to the placement of those groups in some wider social whole. Forms of rebellion and status-seeking of this sort have been central in the scholarship of children's folklore.

Sutton-Smith's fifth and sixth rhetorics focus on more specifically personal issues. The rhetoric of the “imaginary” describes the interior mental processes of people as they explore the possibilities of life. To play is to see the world hypothetically—to dream and fantasize about what could be. Against the resistances and limitations of real-world play, imaginary play offers everyone the chance to be the heroes and heroines of their own lives. Somewhat more broadly, the rhetoric of the “self” considers the psychological implications of play. If the rhetoric of the imaginary focuses on the personal creativity of players, the rhetoric of self focuses on the experiences of play and the uses of play to manage ideas and feelings. Play is literally a form of “re-creation,” a place where people gather, organize, and expend energy.

In a seventh and final rhetoric, “rhetoric of frivolity,” play is not about the building of various kinds of personal and social order but is instead a series of interruptions, inversions, and inconsistencies that effectively deflate the orderliness, hierarchy, and pretence of “official” social structures. The player, frequently a jester or trickster, shows that there are other meanings to life from those that are publicly recognized. That quality of pleasurable interruption and tension,

when the world is seemingly overturned and then allowed to get back on its feet again, we call “fun.” Thus, at the end of Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics, one returns to the very point at which Huizinga began—that play exhibits a “primordial” quality of subjective satisfaction about one’s ability to take on the circumstances of life.

Conclusions: One Author’s View of Play

Clearly, the banquet of play studies is made more sumptuous by a wide variety of offerings. What any individual scholar brings to that table will always be reflective of his or her disciplinary background, ideological commitments, and even personal “taste.” To some extent, individual scholars create their own visions of play just as individual players create their own visions of the world. In that spirit, I conclude simply by celebrating this diversity. Whatever the virtues of such a conclusion, I believe that the differences between contemporary treatments of play are perhaps not as great as they appear and that a more unified or integrated view of play is possible. At any rate, after presenting so many different accounts of this subject, I feel impelled to present here briefly my own conclusions about the nature of play.

Following Huizinga, I believe that play can be understood most productively as either a pattern of *individual action* or, somewhat more broadly, as a pattern of real-time *interaction* that involves both players and their objects. To take this viewpoint is to claim that different kinds of *experiences* (such as excitement, fun, or “flow”) are pertinent to many human activities and are not characteristics of play alone. Likewise, *cultural forms* for activity (such as game rules, sports arenas, casinos, and so forth) are, in my opinion, better understood as play forms, settings, or playgrounds rather than as play itself. Finally, a disposition to play—Lieberman’s “playfulness”—is just that, an attitude or spirit that does not become a part of the play moment until it is put into action.

If play is a pattern of individual action, as the psychologists emphasize, then that pattern has two principal qualities. The first of these, in my view, is *transformation*, a style of relating in which people identify, confront, and then manipulate the elements of the world along lines of their own choosing. Play is a project in which the players form, de-form, and re-form their own circumstances. These objects and contexts can include other people, physical objects,

elements of nature, cultural forms and patterns, and even the players' own bodies and psychological proclivities. To play is to "take on" those elements. Stripped to its essentials, play celebrates the ability of the ego to recognize its placement in the world and to do something about that placement. Stated in the most exalted way, play is the rebellion of consciousness against the forms and forces of the world.

The second quality of play is *consummation*, the idea that play is "completed" in the moments of its making. Unlike work, play is marked by a sense of limitation or "eventfulness." As Huizinga argued, players exclude from momentary consideration many of the world's concerns. Purposes, consequences, statuses, skills, and so forth are to be understood, for the most part, only within the context of the event. For that reason, subjective experience in play events tends to be quite important, and play is often said to be "intrinsically" motivated and rewarded. Ideally, the attainment of these narrowly bounded goals and experiences is the principal rationale for the event. Indeed, play directed to concerns beyond the event turns into work. Play as an ideal type of behavior accentuates the two themes of human freedom: In play, we are cut off from the customary interferences of the world; in play, we are permitted to do things to that world that we might not otherwise be allowed to do. In both ways, players explore the possibilities of self-direction.

As I have argued elsewhere (Henricks 2006), play is not some trivial or exceptional activity but instead is one of the four great modes of human expression. As the transformative-consummatory pattern described above, *play* is distinguished from its great complement and frequent competitor, *work* (the transformative-instrumental pattern). Likewise, play is distinguished from two other fundamental forms: *ritual* and *communitas*. Those latter patterns express the ways in which people voluntarily accept or comply with external patterns and objects. In ritual (the conformitive-instrumental patterns), we accept these frameworks so that we can move ahead with our lives. In *communitas* (the conformitive-consummatory pattern), we plunge into largely other-directed patterns (as at a fair, sporting event, party, and so forth) and find ourselves energized by these forms. To be sure, our real-life behaviors are usually mixes of these modalities. However, the "playful" elements of any behavior can be identified in terms of the two characteristics noted above, and behaviors can be judged to be more or less playful in those terms.

Through a similar process, play can be distinguished as a form of *interaction*. Players may approach the world in distinctive ways, but they quickly find

themselves involved in situations or events that are not entirely under their control. These events commonly have a character or “logic” of their own, which the participants must figure out and then use as the framework for their actions. For me, “playful” events are those that exhibit prominently two qualities: they are *contestive* (rather than integrative), and they are relatively *unpredictable* (rather than predictable). With regard to the first term, this means that play interactions feature a sort of “battle of wills” between the elements of the world. However, playful interactions are distinguished from work-based interactions in that the latter tends to have a rather unidirectional, cumulative quality. In work, people try to accomplish things, or at least the sense of such accomplishment is the stated rationale for the activity. Play, by contrast, is typically a back-and-forth or even meandering affair in which the course of action is uncertain. That is, play tends to be marked by the qualities of surprise, novelty, and excitement. These latter qualities are also characteristics of *communitas*, the integrative/unpredictable pattern of human interaction. However, at an amusement park, concert, or sporting event, most of the excitement comes from what the world does to the participants or from their resulting adjustments to those patterns. Indeed, in the more successful forms of *communitas* or festivity, we are amazed by the novelty, power, and even splendor of the world and by our own sense of being taken up and transformed by such events. In play, we are fascinated instead by our own powers—that we can somehow confront the world and shape our own experiences within it. Finally, ritual—as the integrative/predictable form of the activity—is the pattern of interaction whose character and spirit most oppose that of play. People enter rituals not to find excitement or novelty but to enter frameworks that will guide them securely toward appointed destinations.

I have said all this simply to make the point that activities in the world have different aspects that can be described in different ways. Consider a gathering of people at a baseball game, musical concert, or play museum. Some are playing, some are watching, some are directing traffic, selling souvenirs, or giving guided tours. Most are enjoying themselves to some degree. However, just as there are clearly different roles at the event, so the same person sometimes switches from one role to another (e.g., from player to observer). And it must be emphasized that different people may enact the same role (e.g., as a guest or customer) in quite different ways. Some people can be seen trying to accomplish things with dogged, work-like determination. Others exhibit the self-directed, pleasure-focused strategies we tend to associate with play. Still others seek out the wonders of the environment and experience the joy of being a part of it all;

and others yet give themselves quite ritualistically to that environment (perhaps to be educated, enlightened, or otherwise changed by their participation—or perhaps just to say they've done it). To repeat, people participate in events in quite different ways. Those events (and the various interactions within them) can be described in terms of the aspects noted above.

Trying to distill the truly “playful” qualities of these events is not an attempt to isolate play from other, more important activities or to deny that there are many wonderful, sometimes indefinable, things that happen at a sporting arena or playground. To the contrary, I believe that attempting to discover play's nature is crucial to the broader project of understanding just how important play is in the life of any society. Players of every age sense the importance of activities where they explore the possibilities of life in joyously self-directed, relatively “careless” ways. The task of scholars is to make clear the implications of such activities for human experience and development.

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