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# Play Studies

## A Brief History



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In an article adapted from his latest work, *Play: A Basic Pathway to the Self*, published by The Strong in 2020, the author offers a wide-ranging review of play studies—and the thinkers, philosophers, and scholars who led to the creation of the discipline. He also reviews and seeks to explain for both specialists and more general readers the great diversity of play itself, which he ultimately considers a “pathway of experience” that resembles other such pathways as ritual, work, and what he calls *communitas*. **Key words:** communitas, play, play scholarship, play studies, play theory, ritual, work

**S**TUDENTS OF PLAY realize quickly that their chosen subject is exceedingly difficult to comprehend and investigate. As behavior, play expresses itself in many forms; it includes objects of innumerable variety. No setting for human activity escapes its reach. Play events are prolix in their meanings. Indeed, the same event may mean different things to different people—or to the same individuals at different moments of their involvement. Some types of play find stability through rules, officials, organizations, and records; other types are evanescent, fanciful, and fragile. On occasion, play moves in clear directions, but often it reverses course or becomes entirely unpredictable in its path and implications. Some players train long and hard and conduct their endeavors with a determined spirit. Others muse, laugh, and dally—and forget their commitment the moment it has passed. Play is simple enough that any child can do it—indeed, must do it. Similarly impelled, adults also play in ways that range from the most basic kinds of dabbling and jostling to the heights of literary, artistic, and scientific creation.

Play studies is a collective enterprise that has depended—and continues to depend—on the contributions of many people who have thought deeply about this subject and who have advocated for it in different ways. Here I identify seven

important traditions of play scholarship. In discussing each of these traditions, I emphasize specific works that stand as guideposts for those wishing to understand play in such terms. The themes I select are: remembering the classics; child development; play's nature; imagination—private and public; learning, recreating, healing; the playing of tradition; and modernity, leisure, and games.

I begin by signaling some important twentieth-century works that present a general theory of play, one that acknowledges not only the great variety of playful behaviors but also their commonality. At the forefront of any such listing stands Johan Huizinga's classic, *Homo Ludens*. Written during the 1930s as totalitarianism swept Europe, the book ponders the nature of play and its role in the generation of human culture. In a dark decade, then, many of Huizinga's chapters trace the historical and cross-cultural significance of the social contest, or *agon*, in different fields of culture such as politics, poetry, myth, and war. And the final section rues the decline of the play spirit in the modern, industrialized world. The book's greatest legacy is its insistence that readers see the playful commitment in its broadest cultural terms. Play is not simply the joyous rambling of children; it is central to all forms of creativity and communicates the highest ideals of communities.

Huizinga's book was criticized—and emended—by Roger Caillois. First published in 1958, Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* sets forth its own definition of play and reenvisions the split between modern and premodern versions of that activity. In opposition to Huizinga, Caillois (2001a) conceptualized four different types of play: *agon* (contest), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (role play or simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo). The latter two are prominent in traditional societies; the former two, in modern ones. Caillois also distinguished the more restricted or rule-bound forms of play (*ludus*) from more spontaneous expressions (*paidia*). He emphatically disagreed with Huizinga's joining of play and the sacred. For Caillois, play's characteristic lightness and impertinence are quite different from the gravity and reverence pertinent to sacred immersion (see also Caillois 2001b).

Notable as well are Mihai Spariosu's explorations of play, especially his *Dionysus Reborn*. Spariosu (1989) demonstrates the significance of the play spirit through history by analyzing this theme's development in philosophical and scientific discourse. Especially pertinent, he asserts that this spirit is much older and more various than the rationalized, form-oriented versions that dominate modern thinking about play. Even in the Western world, this pre-Socratic vision endures, especially in romantic figures like Nietzsche and in the more turbulent, antinomian expressions of postmodernism.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) best considers these issues in his *The Ambiguity of Play*. There, Sutton-Smith arranges the contributions of hundreds of play scholars and offers conclusions based on his decades-long inquiry into play's manifestations and meanings. These conclusions include his assessment that play proves a critically important endeavor for many species because it helps these creatures develop new and flexible behaviors that expand their prospects for surviving.

Although Sutton-Smith was impressed with the tremendous variety of playful behaviors—and with the consequent variety of playful theorizing—he also criticized play scholarship. As he saw it, play scholars organize themselves into professional encampments that he terms ideologies, narratives, or “rhetorics.” Comfortably settled, the residents of these camps operate primarily within their chosen terrain. All too often, they are entirely ignorant of what people in the other camps are doing.

Famously, Sutton-Smith identifies seven principal rhetorics of play studies. First comes the dominant approach in the field, what he calls the rhetoric of “progress.” This approach, popular with educationalists, psychologists, and animal behavior scholars, centers on the imputed functionality of play for the young, both humans and animals. Second, he notes the rhetoric of “fate,” the idea that play is connected intimately with chance, destiny, and other matters defying human control. A third rhetoric, “power,” emphasizes the extent to which play takes the shape of battle, contest, or sport. Different again, a fourth approach, “identity,” claims play to be embedded in community celebrations and festivals. In contrast to the previous rhetoric, play here seems less about dividing than about uniting. A fifth pattern focuses on the “imaginary,” especially as this reveals itself in musing, creativity, and phantasmagoria. Sutton-Smith follows this with a sixth rhetoric, the “self.” This perspective stresses the experiences of players, including the seemingly intrinsic satisfactions the activity provides. The seventh rhetoric, and the last, takes the view that play is “frivolous,” that it expresses itself in foolishness, trickery, and insolence directed against the normal order of things.

Scholars who analyze play in modern, industrialized societies tend to emphasize three of the rhetorics: progress, the imaginary, and the self. The other four rhetorics—fate, power, identity, and frivolity—receive greater emphasis from historians, anthropologists, and others who study traditional societies. Whatever the historical or cross-cultural assignment of the rhetorics, Sutton-Smith's central theme remains critical. Researchers must not be blinkered by

the specific, socio-historical contexts in which they work. Play has appeared in many guises through the ages. Beware of those who draw conclusions about play based on one or a few of these expressions.

I add my own attempt to account for play's variation and, perhaps, uniformity. *Play and the Human Condition* argues that playful expressions center on different "fields of relationships" (Henricks 2015b, 73), namely, the environment, body, psyche, society, and culture. We play "in," "with," and sometimes "against" elements of these sorts. These fields of relationships are the special provinces of different natural and social sciences. Understanding play, then, means considering what scholars in these domains have written about this subject from their chosen perspectives and then integrating these viewpoints into an overall theory.

Distinctively, *Play and the Human Condition* argues that play forms, however various, are similar in that they all facilitate self-realization—essentially, comprehending the situations in which persons find themselves, the pertinent capabilities they possess, and the action-strategies they can effectively pursue. Play is a profoundly important "pathway of experience" that cultivates self-realization in one particular way. However, other pathways of experience—ritual, work, and the instances of bonding and collective celebration that I called *communitas*—are just as critical for creatures to discover who they are and what they can do. To be fully human is to pursue all of these avenues of expression and to comprehend the benefits—and the limitations—of each.

Other analysts—including some of the most prominent figures in the human sciences—have presented compelling portraits of play. I describe many of these accounts in this article. Significant books also exist that gather various theories of play (see Millar 1968; Ellis 1973; Levy 1978; Power 2005; Burghardt 2005). Recent handbooks (Pellegrini 2011; Johnson et al. 2015; Smith and Roopnarine 2018) present reviews of research by specialists from play's subdisciplines. And, of course, new journals—most notably the *American Journal of Play* and the *International Journal of Play*—now demonstrate both the variety and the vitality of contemporary investigations of this subject.

Such works display well play's diversity and complexity. Nevertheless, I maintain there is need for a brief history of the field that summarizes key themes and recalls important writings. Because of its wide scope and necessary brevity, this article may give less than adequate attention to some themes—and some scholars—that some readers deem important. Similarly, the socio-historical contexts of many writings may be underdeveloped. Such limitations notwithstanding, regard this piece as an attempt to arrange some of play's important

contributions and to orient readers to the field's broader dimensions.

## Remembering the Classics

Although reflections on play have distant origins, Spariosu's writings make plain that modern thinking about the subject owes much to several nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophers and social scientists, who produced general accounts of play. Their works continue to interest us because they set forth distinctive perspectives about play and why it occurs. In keeping with earlier traditions of scholarship, these writers were willing to think about the individual in broadest terms, to stipulate how play combines the physical and symbolic dimensions of existence, to integrate information from many disciplines, and to speculate—sometimes from little evidence—about play's causes and consequences.

Play's origins in animal life—and the relationship of this to human play—has long been a topic of scholarly concern. In an essay that serves as a source for many modern theories of play, the poet Friedrich Schiller (1965) compared human play to the exuberant roaring of a lion. We play, or so Schiller claimed in his 1795 *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, because we are filled with abundant energy, which needs expression. Indeed, humans have an inherent “play impulse” that forces us to confront—and interpolate—our twin (and sometimes competing) natures of sensuality and rationality. Play gives direction and discipline to untempered physical urges, but it also punctures the artificiality of reason by making this faculty confront the concreteness of the world.

Schiller's “surplus energy” theme influenced the play theory of Herbert Spencer (1920), who believed that the more evolved species play because they meet their survival needs more efficiently and have time left for play and other exercise and bonding. Although play achieves no long-term goals, it provides both “immediate normal gratification” and “maintain[s] or increase[s] ability due to exercise” (628). Competitive games, in particular, offer feelings of success when other forms of combat are not available. A Social Darwinist, Spencer believed that individuals and groups advance themselves through various kinds of competition.

The relationship of play to energy was central in other early theories. Moritz Lazarus (1883) advanced the view that play constitutes not a spending of built-up surplus energy but rather a form of relaxation and rejuvenation. He wished

to contrast play with work. Work, he held, demands seriousness and includes defined end states, standards, and, often, externally mandated processes. Participation may be forced. As a result, work routinely drains individuals physically and psychologically. But play features self-defined ends and processes. It attains buoyancy from the sense that it is illusory rather than real. And play centers on fun. In other words, play energizes those who are tired, distracted, or dispirited (see Levy 1978).

Lazarus's theory received a twentieth-century updating from George Patrick (1916), who emphasized the wearisome qualities of work regimes in offices and factories. Much industrial labor features long periods of restricted activity at a desk or station. It requires prolonged mental concentration and the specialized use of particular muscles. The resulting fatigue produces a longing for rest and relaxation. Sometimes, relief from work takes the form of joking, drinking, fighting, gossiping, and sexual adventure. Such relief also occurs in play, particularly in activities that recall the rhythms of traditional societies—periods of intense, full-bodied exertion alternated with periods of exhilarated, restorative rest. For adults, as for children, energetic physical play recollects earlier stages of human society.

This last idea finds its fullest expression in the theorizing of G. Stanley Hall. Influenced by the evolutionary doctrine of biologist Ernst Haeckel, Hall believed that creatures in their individual development “recapitulate” certain features that were functionally important at different points in their evolution as a species. (Gill slits in human fetuses offer one example.) Like Haeckel, Hall also argued that this physical development paralleled social development. That is, contemporary individuals feel some yearning to repeat activities and experiences more common to the distant past.

For Hall (1931), then, play expresses “the motor habits and spirit of the past of the race persisting in the present as rudimentary functions sometimes of and always akin to rudimentary organs” (202). When young children feel free to do as they please, they run and jump, dance, shout, throw things, and push one another about. Such activities are the heritage of our species. However, Hall also took a cue from Schiller and maintained that unbound forms of both physicality and rationality are problematic. The best forms of play cultivate human capability by moderating, directing, and refining our deeply ingrained inclinations.

Hall intended to counter another prominent theory, that of Karl Groos, which contended that play less frequently looks backward to distant foundations than it prepares for—or even practices—future responsibilities. What

distinguishes a playful species from a nonplayful species is that the former is less bound by inherited, and thus fixed, directives for behavior. Playing species have some ability to shape their behavior through practice and learning. This gives them a more flexible behavior repertoire useful for living in complicated, changing environments.

Groos developed his thesis in two books, *The Play of Animals* (1898) and *The Play of Man* (1901). He does not dismiss the importance of instinct in orienting behavior; after all, these inborn patterns explain why widely separated members of a species (cats or dogs, for example) play in the same ways. Instead, he emphasizes that these inclinations (think of fighting, hunting, or fleeing from attack) are not fully developed but require exercise and refinement long before they find use as serious adult behaviors.

Of special importance, Groos (1898) argues that play assists evolution. As he puts it, “when the inherited instinct may be supplemented by individual experience, it need not be so carefully elaborated by selection, *which accordingly favours the evolution of individual intelligence for blind instinct*” (xx) (italics in the original). This stress on intelligence and learning appears even more prominently in *The Play of Man*. Humans have a propensity, perhaps an instinct, to observe, imitate, and teach. They play in many ways for many reasons—physiological, biological, psychological, social, and even aesthetic. These activities reflect their abilities to experiment, experience, ponder, and reinvent themselves, often with life effects entirely unanticipated at the time of their commission.

As we might anticipate, scholars criticize these classic writers for, among other things, the logical shortcomings of their thinking, the quality of the research that supported their speculation, and their frequently culture-bound viewpoints (see Henricks 2015a). Nevertheless, their work confronts key issues that continue to be important in play studies—the connections between human and animal nature, the role of inborn patterns of behavior, the pertinence of invention and learning, and the contribution of play to the development of a species as well as to individual development.

## Child Development

The field of play studies is shaped profoundly by researchers, teachers, and policy advocates whose careers center on helping children realize their potential as persons. This commitment expresses their belief that children need both supportive

social environments and opportunities for creative, self-managed behaviors. Self-managed behaviors—however aimless, foolish, or unimportant they may appear to onlookers—prove fundamental to the building of skills, values, norms, social relationships, and forms of emotional resolve. Furthermore, child development consists not of a random spread of capabilities but rather of a coherent trajectory in which some patterns take precedence over others. In play, individuals discover which behavior strategies work and which do not, and then—given the basis of this learning—they take on more complicated challenges (see Bruner, Jolly, and Silva 1976; Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey 1999; Fromberg and Bergen 2006; Bergen 2015).

Sigmund Freud's work is fundamental to the developmental perspective. Freud contended that human awareness and emotion management develop in stages and that the psychological patterns of adult life build on the resolutions of issues confronted in early childhood. Reflecting his medical training, Freud was interested in the role of physical maturation in human development, the significance of different bodily organs in processing information about the world, and the more general ways in which physical energy is gathered, directed, and spent. For this reason, he emphasized the powerful influence of culture and social experience, especially within families.

Famously, Freud conceived of a psyche in conflict, one in which different elements—psychobiological urges, internalized moral commands, and commitments to rational control—seek expression. Many of these conflicts take place at deeper levels of consciousness, and many remain unresolved throughout life. Consternations about the past mingle with interpretations of present-day circumstances and with hopes for the future (see Rieff 1961; Henricks 2015b).

Freud's initial theory of play focuses on wish fulfillment. In play, children create carefully bounded settings in which they explore challenges of living and perform behaviors they might not otherwise undertake without suffering adverse consequences. In that sense, play resembles creative activity in literature and art. Freud (1958) states this connection directly: "Perhaps we may say that every child at play behaves like an imaginative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or more truly, he rearranges the things of his world and orders it in a new way that pleases him better" (45). Much of the pleasure of play, Freud continues, comes from investigating themes pertinent to the lives of older children and adults. What drives a child is the desire "to be grown up, the wish that helps to 'bring him up'" (47). Extending this logic, Freud claims that adults are much less likely to play in this expressly psychodramatic way. Instead, they



prefer to spend their creativity in joking, teasing, and artistic pursuits.

Freud (1967) subsequently modified his theory. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he argued that oftentimes children, even very young children, confront difficult and even unpleasant issues. Why pursue these challenges instead of more relaxing endeavors? His famous example of this issue relates the actions of his young grandchild in a game with a wooden reel tied to a string. The child continually threw the reel over the edge of his curtained cot and, then, using the string, he drew it back into view. The most psychologically significant part of this game, as Freud saw it, was the act of throwing the reel away. Freud thought the reel symbolized a favored object (most profoundly, the child's mother). By casting it/her away, the child was practicing instinctual renunciation, that is, he was learning how to control his own desires.

This idea of ego-control has been central for many in the Freudian tradition, especially Freud's daughter Anna and his student Erik Erikson. In his noted essay, "Toys and Reasons," Erikson (1963) states this theme plainly: "Play is a function of the ego," a feat of understanding and direction in which players try to "synchronize the bodily and the social processes with the self" (211). There are, he explains, many kinds of issues (gravity, time, fate and causality, social reality, bodily drives, and so forth) to comprehend. As children age, they expand the range of worldly elements they regulate from their own bodily processes to small objects around them to other persons and relationships. In such ways, developing persons establish confidence in their ability to operate determinedly and rationally in a complicated world.

A second important tradition stems from the scholarship of Jean Piaget (1955, 1962; Piaget and Inhelder 1972). Although Piaget was interested early in his career in becoming a clinician (having studied under another of Freud's pupils, Carl Jung), he focused on cognitive rather than emotional issues in human development. In Piaget's view, children—and the rest of us—act like little scientists or technicians in our engagements with the world. That is, we seek knowledge of this world—and of ourselves as parts of that world—by developing self-administered strategies for comprehending and controlling it through concrete activities. Some strategies prove useful to us in these acts of comprehension. We retain, practice, and continually refine these more effective "schemas."

Piaget (1962) emphasizes two poles in the knowledge-making process. "Assimilation" is his term for applications of already established schemas, essentially administering otherness according to one's psychic and physical imperatives. The opposite pole, "accommodation," refers to the adjustments individuals

make to their own thoughts and actions, especially when they encounter new challenges or when they fail to handle a situation effectively. The interaction between these two processes leads to “adaptation,” or effective positioning within the various environments of a child’s life.

Piaget’s (1966b) stage model of child development is one of the more famous conceptualizations in the human sciences. From birth to two years, children process information primarily in a “sensorimotor” fashion, that is, through bodily movements and sensory recognitions. From two to seven, they typically use language, nonverbal gestures, and imagery to organize information about the world and to give and receive interpersonal directions. Still, this “preoperational” stage remains relatively nonabstract in character, and children commit numerous errors in their analyses of how the world works. A “concrete-operational” stage occurs from age seven to age eleven. Increasingly, children use abstract symbols to process information, but commonly they require concrete examples to give these ideas meaning. After age eleven, most move on to a “formal-operational” stage, thinking and communicating comfortably with abstract symbols, using relatively standard forms of logic, and applying and managing their own classificatory schemes. This latter pattern is putatively the ideal for adult functioning, though individuals also operate in the earlier ways in various circumstances.

Play is central to development, because play is the laboratory where individuals exercise and refine their abilities to comprehend and manage the world. Distinctively (and controversially), Piaget identifies play primarily with the pole of assimilation, that is, with forms of physical and symbolic practice (see Sutton-Smith 1966). Stated simply, young children enjoy playing because they enjoy acts of control. Initially, these acts center on bodily movements; increasingly they focus on broader ranges of objects, including abstract symbols.

Another strand of Piaget’s work involves the development of moral reasoning, especially in games. Games feature self-imposed restrictions that narrow the range of actions, set goals, and facilitate social interaction. There are different types of games: physical practice, imaginative or symbolic pretense, and games with clearly identified rules. In contrast to prior theories that stressed the role of cultural indoctrination by authority figures, Piaget (1966a) argues that children learn rules through their own squabbles and negotiations. In accordance with his broader theory of cognition, he describes rule manufacture as becoming increasingly abstract, far reaching, and subject to rational control. Players shift from primitive forms of egoism (what is in this situation for me?) to moral real-

ism (rules must be obeyed) to understanding that rules are based on mutual consent (to be modified and improved as participants determine). Once, again, play is the intensely social laboratory where these investigations occur.

A third tradition stems from the theorizing of Lev Vygotsky (1976, 1978). Although Vygotsky was familiar with some elements of Freud's and Piaget's approaches, he rejected their respective emphases on emotion and cognition as foundations of play. Instead—and in keeping with the Marxian tradition—he advocated a more process-oriented, dialectical theory that highlights several aspects of individuals and, beyond that, of the social environment in which they are engaged. As he (Vygotsky 1976) summarizes, play responds to the “child's needs, inclinations, incentives, and motives to act” (537).

Like Karl Marx, Vygotsky stresses that humans address many kinds of ambitions in often very concrete situations. Often enough, that goal-oriented activity results in failure. Play then is a special way of dealing with these real-world blockages and frustrations. Through feats of imagination, children reconstitute situations by redefining objects, settings, persons, and activities. These realignments give the players a greater chance to experience success and thus to experience feelings of control. To this degree, and in keeping with Freud's early theory, play is “essentially wish fulfillment” (540).

However, Vygotsky's theory is more action based and purposive than Freud's. Imagination for the former consists less of a flight from the real world than of a reengagement with it. Of special use in this process is what Vygotsky calls the “pivot” (546). The pivot is a redefinition of a concrete object (perhaps a long stick that becomes a “horse”) that maintains the physicality of the scene at the same time that it transports the child's imagining. Young children need pivots that closely resemble the imagined object; older ones can handle more subtle abstractions.

Some challenges a child addresses are self-imposed; others come from players who may be more skilled or assured; some even come from adults. Responding to challenges of these latter types also advances development. The challenges must not be too difficult (and thus, overly stressful) or too easy (and boring). There is an optimum balance between situationally required skills and currently possessed skills that Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development” (552). It is part of a child's nature to want to advance, but a graduated set of advancements seems to work best.

Especially pertinent, Vygotsky emphasizes specifically the social aspects of play. Humans play—and learn—by interacting with one another, by setting

and responding to challenges. Rules are also important for coordinating such action. So is imaginative pretense, both collective and individual. In sum, communities as well as individuals develop themselves through these processes (see Newman and Holzman 1993).

### Play's Nature

As Schiller emphasizes, much of play's charm and importance derives from the ways it integrates imaginative thought with deep sensuality. When we play, we feel ourselves reawakening from our ordinary lives, not just in terms that we create and administer cognitively but also as the amazed inhabitants of our surging bodies. To be sure, players are thinkers; but they also are movers. This combination leads to acts of doing and making—not only of objects of many types but also of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Involvement in such activity produces more than intellectual discernment. It leads to excitement, fun, and, perhaps in its most sublime manifestations, joy.

This issue—the coursing of the body and the relationship of this to developing forms of mentality—has been an important theme in play studies. Some of this work has centered on the play of other animal species and comparisons of it to human play. Another focus has been the study of human physiology, including the operations of the brain.

How did play emerge as a kind of thing creatures do? As prominent animal researcher Robert Fagen (1995) has discussed, only a few of the million or so animal species—notably birds and mammals and perhaps some reptiles and fishes—play. Most creatures do not play and have no need to. Those nonplaying species survive by relying on biologically programmed, unlearned responses to the challenges presented by limited environments. Playing creatures, by contrast, tend to live in complicated, changing environments that feature many kinds of challenges. Finding food, mating, and defense may be problematic. A longer period of maturation and social support may be part of the survival package. Under such conditions, activities that practice and refine behavior become pertinent, especially for the young. Karl Groos's (1898) comments on this matter still resound: "*The very existence of youth is due in part to the necessity for play; the animal does not play because he is young, he has a period of youth because he must play*" (112–13) (italics in the original).

Behaviorist researchers, at least those who focus only on observed reactions

to equally observed stimuli, have not been prominent contributors to play studies. However, there is a version of behaviorism—stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R)—that positions organismic processes between changing environmental stimuli and responses to these. Although some species react immediately and predictably to certain occurrences, others seem to be able to pause their responses and even to monitor the ways in which they seek stimulation. Daniel Berlyne (1966) argued that this pattern suggests an internal ability to influence arousal levels, perhaps between the extremes of boredom and lethargy, on the one hand, and overstimulation and stress, on the other. Furthermore, some animals are able to regulate their movements in response to assessments of system functioning, in effect to behave proactively rather than reactively.

Modern neuroscientists explore this issue of brain-body connections, notably Antonio Damasio (1994, 1999, 2010), who is interested in the evolution of consciousness. Damasio emphasizes that the brain operates at several levels of wakefulness. Some of these levels manage various bodily processes and respond to external stimuli without conscious awareness, but complex animals have a pattern of focused attention he calls “core consciousness” (Damasio 1999, 93–94). This means that they have awareness of themselves as distinct, or separable, elements of situations. For example, a rabbit knows that it is the one being chased by a fox; it experiences emotions pertinent to that sense of danger. Likewise, the fox has a sense of its own place in this unfolding drama. Said differently, creatures like these are aware of themselves in the act of knowing—and as the agents of their own movements.

Humans (and other species to some extent) have “extended consciousness,” which entails much wider and more abstract conceptions of the situations they are in. Individuals have memories of past events; they project themselves into future scenarios; they ponder present-time circumstances that lie outside their perceptual surround. They even consider themselves parts of relationships—enduring connections to other people, places, and things. Crucially, they are aware of themselves bringing these matters to focused attention.

Much of this—essentially, figuring out where one stands in situations—comprises a sort of cognitive mapping. But these mental assessments also invoke powerful emotions, which help the subject act quickly or, just as suddenly, freeze in place. Taken together, such processes serve as indicators of different levels of selfhood (Damasio 1999, 2010). For their part, humans operate on all of these levels—from the involuntary monitoring of internal bodily conditions to the perception of being an active element in situations to the comprehension of

existence as an extended “autobiography”—simultaneously. When we play, we engage these different levels of self (Henricks 2015b). Our highest levels of consciousness try to impose themselves on our more basic patterns of functioning. Our lower levels challenge, confuse, and sometimes overwhelm our cognitive faculties with their demands.

These lower-level, and more deeply seated, processes have been studied by animal behavior scholars. Researchers Sergio and Vivien Pellis surgically altered the brain structures of laboratory animals to determine how such excision affects their emotions and their abilities to play. In one instance, rats whose cortex had been removed were still able to play-fight by relying on deeper-brain processes; however, they lacked the qualities of social reciprocity present in unimpaired rats (Pellis, Pellis, and Whislaw 1992; Pellis, Pellis, and Bell 2010). Such research implies that some play behaviors (movements and emotional expressions) rely on the most ancient brain regions; but more complicated social behaviors involve coordination with other, more recently evolved, structures.

Are there specific neural conduits that facilitate the different forms of emotionally charged behavior animals, as well as humans, express? This question inspired the research of Jaak Panksepp (1998, 2008, 2010). By electrically stimulating deep brain regions in animals, Paaksepp attempted to locate these internal commitments. In addition to discovering what he called the “seeking/expectancy” pathway, he hypothesized six additional conduits: rage, fear, lust, care/nurturance, separation/panic, and play/joy. Some emotions, such as rage and fear, are more basic and thus deeply individual. The final four seem connected to sociality and to relationships with higher brain regions.

The emergence of playful behaviors in animals has been a central commitment of Robert Fagen. Based on field observations, Fagen (1981, 1995) has categorized five kinds of play. The first, and simplest, comes when a young creature repeats brief, jerky movements separated from their usual functions, for example, an infant who stops nursing and begins to manipulate the breast of its mother. A second type of play occurs when a youth performs stylized or exaggerated solo movements, such as bucking or bounding. A third takes the form of physically based social interaction, perhaps chasing, sparring, or wrestling. A fourth involves social games that seem to have agreed-upon rules and that may include adults as well as the young. Hide-and-seek and tag would be examples. A fifth consists of games featuring social intimacy and cognitive interaction, such as occur in mother-infant play or in instructions for object manipulation and tool use. Fagen’s general point is that various species engage in these different

levels of play. Some, like the great apes, operate at the fifth level, so we humans are not alone in our proclivities.

A final researcher I wish to consider, Gordon Burghardt (1984, 2005, 2010), has offered a broad theory of play's evolution. Burghardt argues that the division between playing and nonplaying species is not a clear one; quite the opposite, the ability—and inclination—to play is a more gradual change that parallels the development of other kinds of complexities in creatures. In other words, play is both cause and consequence of species change. Furthermore, he considers the seemingly nonfunctional swirling, poking, and batting activities of creatures like fish, turtles, and octopi as preparations for the more complicated behaviors that we associate with birds and mammals.

Some species, who play rarely or simply, engage in what Burghardt (2005, 119) terms “primary process” play. Such play is a quasi-accidental expression or movement that constitutes an adjustment to external conditions or a sudden burst of energy. Normally, this does not lead to sustained behavior changes but it may be a kind of preadaptation that makes the creature expand its possibilities. “Secondary-process” play refers to the practicing of an expanded range of behaviors that help maintain fitness, motor coordination, and behavioral flexibility. Finally, “tertiary-process” play is a more consciously directed attempt to develop and explore new behavior strategies. Innovation of that sort is conspicuous among creatures who spend much of their youth in play.

Why do some creatures play? Burghardt's (2005) “surplus resource” theory emphasizes several factors, some internal to the organism and others pertinent to its environment. Animals are more likely to play when they have sufficient metabolic energy, when they are free from serious stress or food shortages, when they need stimulation to reach an optimal level of physical functioning, and when they follow a life-style that involves complex behaviors in varying environments. As Burghardt stresses, play is a “joint outcome of genetics, experience, and selection” (174). In some environments, at least, creatures with flexible arrays of behaviors and patterns of social support survive and perpetuate their kind. Play contributes to this flexibility.

### **Imagination—Private and Public**

Social play in animals often starts with stylized entreaties—little bows, movements of limbs, facial expressions, or other gestures of supplication (see Beckoff

1995). These gestures, if reciprocated, move the behavior into a different mode. As Gregory Bateson (1972) emphasized, in many species, real fighting is deadly, but play fighting features mutually recognized forms of restraint. Biting becomes mouthing or nipping; participants willingly alternate positions of dominance and subordination; the fight stops by mutual consent. The interaction is “framed” as the specific kind of involvement we call play.

When animals—and humans—organize behavior in this way, the act has many implications. It suggests the degree to which the creatures have control over what they do, both starting and stopping their actions—and the broader event—voluntarily. It denotes social play’s intersubjectivity, that is, that the participants take the feelings of the other into account. It allows them to gauge their status relative to one another on matters like strength, speed, flexibility, and mental resolve. It reflects their capability to modify their own behaviors by trying out (in the example of fighting) new feints, recoveries, and attacks. Most profoundly, it signifies the crude beginnings of rule-based behavior, which promotes intragroup harmony (and thus, survival).

The ability to reframe behavior not just as play but as many forms of recasting, practicing, and dramatizing reaches its highest development in humans (see Goffman 1974). In the case of play, this means players understanding the proposed event to be different from ordinary affairs, especially in its freedom to explore new styles of expression and to disregard enduring consequences. Participants can redefine settings, objects, behaviors, and even their own identities. In such ways, they cast an imaginary spell over the proceedings.

Huizinga (1955) famously compared these processes to the establishment of a “sacred spot” or “magic circle” (20.) Inside that circle, one can find exotic costumes, strange playing grounds, odd customs, arcane bodies of knowledge, and curious pledges of allegiance. Time and space acquire different meanings as well. To outsiders—that is, to nonplayers—the whole affair may seem silly, inconsequential, and even disrespectful of society’s proprieties. But the insiders know that they have created, however momentarily, a new world to live in. Reality has been granted a hypothetical, as-if quality. “Let us presume,” or so the players seem to say, “that we are now in a place marked by these special rules. Then let us see what we can do here.”

As Sutton-Smith (1997) stressed, the imaginary is one of the key domains of play—and of play studies. His chapter on the topic examines primarily creative expression in literature and art. The romantic writers, in particular, created literary worlds for their readers to inhabit and explore emotionally. However, all



players fictionalize reality and explore the possibilities of these settings. More than that, imagination is a collective as well as individual matter. Players act out roles in publicly acknowledged stories as well as in their own fantasies. In so doing, they learn what it means to be part of the human community.

What is the nature of playful speculation? Jerome Bruner (1986) distinguishes two kinds of thought making: “paradigmatic” and “narrative.” Paradigmatic thought is orderly and logical and subject to judgments about correctness. Piaget’s theory, discussed previously, emphasizes this type of processing. By contrast, narrative thought is looser, more image based, and subject to multiple layers of interpretation. Creative exploration in music, drama, literature, and other forms of storytelling tends to be of this type. Paradigmatic play helps individuals make orderly transitions, think systematically, and communicate clearly; in such ways, it narrows and refines behavior possibilities. Narrative play opens possibilities by offering new roles, suggesting untried courses of action, and valuing multiple perspectives. Narrative play makes people ponder unpredictable or uncontrollable courses of events, revealing the tenuous relationship between past, present, and future.

Greta Fein (1981, 1989) analyzed collective story making in pretend play and suggested some of its developmental functions. When young children play, they do not learn rules in a systematic or rigid way. Instead, their activity tends to focus on assigning roles, creating scenarios, and interpreting the meanings of the various circumstances that arise. Much like Freud, she viewed sociodramatic play as a chance to explore the meanings of life’s pressing concerns within altered and protected contexts that the players themselves administer. More specifically, play gives children the chance to express (and control) their own emotions. Notably, these settings are social in character. Other people give reality to our feelings and help us manage their effects.

Important also are the writings of Dorothy and Jerome Singer (1990, 2005), who develop explicitly the social implications of imaginary play. Influenced by both the Piagetian and Freudian traditions, and more specifically by the work of Erikson, the Singers conceptualize development as a lifelong process in which present-day concerns are of crucial importance. When individuals play, they bring these concerns to the dramas they create and inhabit. However, they do not create such dramas entirely by themselves. Rather, young children operate amid strong social and cultural influences coming from many sources. These, too, provide themes for pretend play.

In contradistinction to Erikson, the Singers (1990) emphasize that develop-

ment attempts more than to gain competence, integration, and mastery of an increasingly complicated range of issues. Development also involves learning how to access, evaluate, and contribute to social relationships. In other words, both individuation and attachment are critical. Partly for such reasons, the Singers are suspicious of some kinds of media involvement, especially that provided by television, movies, and video games. These forms tend to shift much of the creativity from the child to the organizers of the cultural products. Furthermore, when media play goes entirely unsupervised by care givers, these care givers cede their proper role to commercial interests. In sum, pretend play is sensitive to many contexts: psychological, social, cultural, physical, and environmental.

Sutton-Smith's (2017) view of childhood creativity differs from the Singers' emphasis on social integration and behavioral responsibility. Sutton-Smith pays attention to the fact that very often children do not do what their caretakers wish. Instead, they take satisfaction in refusals and evasions. Consequently, visions of supreme powers, defiant acts, gross words and behavior, and even enlarged sexual organs play prominently in children's fantasies. Sutton-Smith's collections of children's stories, rhymes, and jokes makes clear that children take pleasure in what adults would call misbehavior. More than that, they revel in stories, acts, and experiences that provoke such basic emotions as fear, anger, disgust, surprise, sadness, and happiness. In most cases, players see themselves mastering their own hesitations and installing themselves as the heroes of their own lives. If these assertions feel like rebellions against the authorities, all the better.

### **Learning, Recreating, Healing**

Most play scholars take interest in the benefits of playing, or at least of playing in particular ways. They believe that play contributes to the development of individuals and to their well-being at every stage of life. This development occurs in many contexts—physical, psychological, social, and cultural. Through play, groups as well as individuals learn about their character and capabilities. As Huizinga (1955) argued, the driving energy behind play may well be the search for “fun,” but play ends up being much more than that.

I should note, however, that some researchers remain skeptical of play's purported benefits (see Sutton-Smith 1997). One of these, prominent play scholar Peter Smith (1995), has conceptualized what he calls the “play ethos,” essentially an overly idealized and uncritical affirmation of play's positive functions. Still,

Smith and most other critics are advocates for play. While it may be difficult to demonstrate empirically that play has designated effects on human development that differ sharply from those produced by other vigorous, engaged activities, clearly play provides settings or contexts where participants can practice existing skills and explore new ones.

Just because the self-managed behaviors of play are fun, they keep players intrigued and involved. Because play allows participants to separate themselves from routine duties and long-term relationships, it lets them focus on problems—often quite specific cognitive and physical challenges—they might otherwise not address. Play events facilitate heightened emotions and an awareness of the generation, management, and completion of these feelings. Play encourages entry into complicated, sometimes arcane cultural scripts. Often, it mandates that participants recognize and negotiate with one another. Play's very triviality (for who would say that throwing a ball into a basket or completing a jigsaw puzzle is profoundly important?) inevitably shifts the interpretive focus to questions about the character and capability of the participant. For these reasons, play is by its nature an exercise in self-realization (Henricks 2015b). That activity is not the only way in which individuals and groups realize themselves, but it is one crucially important pathway. When people play, they transform not only their surrounding environments but also themselves (Schwartzman 1978).

### *Learning*

Play studies have a major quest to understand the pertinence of play to education, both formal and informal. As David Kushner (2015) explains, the two issues—play and education—are different matters and, for this reason, have a tenuous relationship to one another. Education, particularly in the formal context of the school, is the process by which people learn ideas, skills, values, and behavioral norms that will be useful in later stages of life. Many methods of instruction are pertinent to this process; teachers—and adults more generally—commonly take a strong role in this process. By contrast, play typically prizes self-directed behaviors, especially those that feature creativity or exploration and that are motivated by personal curiosity, excitement, and fun. To what extent do these two commitments overlap?

One of the early proponents of play-as-learning was the eighteenth-century educational reformer Friedrich Froebel (see Provenzo 2009). Influenced by the Romantic movement in Germany (which included writers like Johann von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller), Froebel sought ways for children to learn from

direct encounters with nature. This led him to develop his system of “gifts” and “occupations,” essentially a set of physical devices with accompanying instructions that would support self-directed inquiry. This general approach—in which students proceed at their own pace and in accordance with their own interests—contrasts sharply with then-dominant strategies in European education, which were typically didactic, formal, and punishment based.

Educator John Dewey (1902, 1910) offered a pedagogical theory similar in its focus on material objects and processes. Dewey believed that students learn best from concrete practical challenges, which cultivate experience and thus enhance memory and build skills. Although he opposed pedagogies that focus solely on academic subjects, he also rejected those that stress only a child’s interests and enthusiasms. The best forms of learning, as he saw it, mediate these extremes. For the same reason, he rejected the polarities of work and play. Too much work is drudgery and boredom. Too much play begets aimlessness and foolishness. What Dewey advocated, then, was the development of a playful spirit, which can inform purposive, serious activity.

Maria Montessori, another important reformer, explored the relationship between work and play. In Montessori’s (1992) view, children enjoy utilitarian activities such as cooking, building, and other forms of domestic work. Indeed, if given the choice, they usually prefer these concrete pursuits to storytelling and more exotic forms of role playing. However, adult-managed, utilitarian play is not especially enjoyable. Rather, children prefer to play in their own ways with objects and settings appropriate to their developing minds and bodies. They enjoy setting their own goals, assigning roles, and negotiating rules. For such reasons, Montessori schools typically feature hands-on activities, choices by students, social involvement, and intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards.

Vivian Paley’s commitment to role play and fantasy contrasts with Montessori’s approach. For Paley (1992, 2005), children’s explorations through stories and dramatic scenarios of life’s possibilities contribute significantly to their development. Stories, especially those that are fantastic or exotic, encourage children to learn complicated narratives that grant them new concepts, tasks, and behavioral norms. When children inhabit and perform these characters—perhaps a super hero or a shaggy dog—they move outside themselves, imagining how such characters would think and act. In the guise of these characters, they learn to give and receive affection—and express reproof—in ways that are more simple and less consequential than the productions of their ordinary selves.

Taken in combination, all these ideas have been central to various educational philosophies that emphasize student-directed activity, creativity, child-sized environments, material objects, social interaction, dramatic play, and project-based learning. These educational settings include Waldorf schools, Reggio Emilia, and the Sudbury and Summerhill schools. Such approaches stress that children mature best by managing their own behaviors, by confronting challenges that have no preestablished answers, and by administering their own communities of learning in democratic ways. In such whole-person development, aesthetic and moral concerns matter as much as cognitive and technical ones.

Play advocates working in bureaucratic, governmentally regulated school systems seek ways to implement some of these approaches into their curricula. As those reformers see it, too many public schools are oriented toward achieving proficiency of basic skills and, more precisely, toward scoring well on state-mandated tests. In this context, some play researchers emphasize the utility of play-based techniques for raising skills in subjects like reading, mathematics, and science (Christie and Roskos 2015; Sarama and Clements 2009). Others stress the importance of play for the broader development of individuals and groups of students (Fisher et al. 2011).

### *Recreating*

Among other concerns, play advocates especially worry about the decline and sometimes the elimination, of physically vigorous play during school. One area of study, then, has been the significance of recess. Researchers (Pellegrini 2005; Jarrett 2015) stress that children in school need spaced learning or cognitive breaks. Physiologically, vigorous activity promotes the growth of neurons in different brain regions as well as synaptic flexibility (Sattelmair and Ratey 2009). It supports the development of muscular strength and coordination as well as general feelings of bodily competence. These benefits take on added importance because the sedentary life-style of many children in the industrializing world raises the rates of obesity and other related health concerns.

Compulsory physical education and fitness classes can address some of these issues. Informally organized recess, however, allows children to build friendships with one another, develop negotiating skills, and confront status hierarchies. Outdoor activities reacquaint them with the natural environment and with physical relationships more generally. Unsupervised, or “open,” play leads to a greater variety of experiences and the development of small groups where individual students can be leaders as well as followers.

The creation of playgrounds in modern urban environments presents a related concern. Many play scholars recall the relative freedom they had during their own childhoods to roam their neighborhoods with friends, explore natural areas, and engage in pick-up games in unoccupied lots and fields. But urban conditions—densely settled, mobile, anonymous, and socially diverse—have altered some of these possibilities, and parents worry about child safety.

One response has been the design and construction of playscapes, manufactured environments that facilitate community play (see Frost 1992; Frost, Wortham, and Reifel 2008). These environments may be indoors or outdoors, although the latter provides a greater range of play activities and styles of physical expression. Ideally, playscapes feature specialized areas with facilities suitable for different age groups; but they also permit some play involving children of various ages. In addition to open areas for sports and other physical games, planned playscapes should include spaces for quieter pursuits like building, sand play, and gardening. The areas should not be overdesigned, including instead spaces for messy and unregulated play.

The quest for informal, public spaces for play has been championed by an emerging sector of play studies known as “playwork” (Brown and Taylor 2008; Wilson 2009). Drawing its inspiration from the play of British children amid the rubble of the World War II bombed sites, playworkers negotiate with communities to establish open lots for play and to furnish these with objects of many types, including construction materials, tires, and other “loose parts.” Informal structures, built and rearranged by the children themselves, are preferred over prefabricated types of apparatus. Playworkers facilitate play by helping gather children, ensuring their access to sites, and forestalling interference from non-players. They do not direct what occurs; however, these play activities follow the children’s agenda. Even more broadly, playworkers build relationships with community members and local agencies to support the general well-being of the children. This approach implicitly views each child as an individual with special talents, concerns, and needs. Everyone has a right to play.

### *Healing*

Understanding playwork means recognizing that many children do not have easy access to playgrounds and that many confront other psychological, social, or cultural constraints that keep them from playing. This fact—that some children have difficulty playing—was the focus of Sara Smilansky’s (1968) research. Smilansky demonstrated that the children in her study who were from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds tended to engage in less complex forms of socio-dramatic play. By intervening in ways that allowed the children to develop and express more complex and inventive stories, she was able to support improved academic performance. This general approach—using play to support specific kinds of development—is termed “play-training studies.”

Play techniques, especially those involving sociodramatic play, have been valuable tools in psychotherapy. Recognizing that young children commonly lack the language skills (and the confidence) to communicate effectively with adult therapists, Anna Freud (1965) used physical objects like dolls and toys as elements of her therapy. She also stressed that any interpretations of a child’s behaviors and words must be attuned to the individual child’s comprehensions and abilities.

Focusing less on children’s developing egos and more on deep, sometimes preconscious urges, Melanie Klein participated in play activities with her young patients. Following Sigmund Freud’s (1967) conceptualization of the instincts for life and death, Klein (1955) argued that children at all ages experience tension-filled relationships with objects and, especially, with care givers. Desires to reach out, attach, and love rival equally strong impulses to reject, push aside, and destroy. Play scenarios with toys or imagined characters and animals help children confront these contradictory feelings.

Donald Winnicott’s influential work combined elements of the Freudian tradition with Vygotskian themes. In Winnicott’s (1971) view, therapy itself is a type of play, which exists in the space between the private imaginations of the patient and the therapist. The challenge for the therapist comes in helping a patient enter this intersubjective space, which should feature mutual trust, safety, and open communication. No predetermined pattern or script exists for the resulting behaviors, displays, and conversations. Furthermore, therapists must be willing to abandon their privileged role as expert. They must recognize that meaning occurs at many levels, including the deep feelings Klein investigated and the more clearly conscious understandings stressed by Anna Freud. Recalling Vygotsky’s concept of the pivot, Winnicott emphasizes the importance of the “transitional object,” a favored object like a blanket or stuffed animal that a child uses as a physical point of stability and as a target of the child’s need for attachment, sense of loss, anger, sadness—indeed, all such feelings. Because play combines physical and symbolic meanings in unusual and creative ways, it represents a particularly effective form for revealing and appraising the self (see Meares 2005).

Modern play therapy occurs in many settings and involves many techniques. Children who are seriously ill and withdrawn benefit from playful activity. So do elderly persons in hospitals and assisted-living facilities. Interventions include engagements with art, drama, music, games, toys, pets, and clowns. Groups as well as individuals explore identities and relationships in this way (Lobman and O'Neill 2011).

Cindy Dell Clark (2002, 2015) has identified certain features common to these different strategies. Clark maintains that play therapy is effective because it is self-directed and honors the imagination of the patient. It brings individuals out of their isolation into social spaces that allow others to play important roles; thus, it builds relationships. Play's hypothetical, or as-if, quality helps people adopt new behaviors and points of view. The ambiguity of play—that is, the relative absence of simple or correct answers—empowers participants and grants them the energy of invention and discovery. Finally, play helps people attain a more circumspect relationship to some of their more dangerous or difficult emotions. In play, we joke, tease, and laugh together at the very issues that torment us in our private moments.

### **The Playing of Tradition**

As the reader may have noted, the previous discussions center on themes that Sutton-Smith (1997) claims are typical for analyses of modern play. These rhetorics, to recall his argument, prize ideas about progress and development, creative imagination, and forms of self-experience. Play becomes the seedbed or laboratory where individuals—and especially young people—develop and evaluate the possibilities of living.

Modern Western societies commonly mythologize the self-creating, entrepreneurial, and socially unrestricted individual. They picture social and cultural forms as constructs that these enterprising persons build, maintain, and modify according to their ever-changing interests. Not surprisingly, these same societies celebrate and encourage children less as the guardians of tradition and eventual caretakers of the old than as the creators of a future that will be quite different. Play—and work—are idealized as processes for making change (Henricks 2015b).

To be clear, however—and Sutton-Smith insists on this point—this is not the only way to envision play or to interpret its meanings. Traditional societies



recognize the significance of play for adults as well as for children and for communities as well as for individuals. In earlier centuries, play events were fixtures in yearly cycles of festivals and rituals—and they still are in many societies. These events invite participation from wide segments of the population. They communicate with sacred forces. They look to the past as much as to the future. Restating Sutton-Smith's terms, play of this sort explores themes of power, community identity, frivolity, and fate.

Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, with its emphasis on the agon, or contest, interprets play in this broadly cultural context. It focuses on the play of adults in many kinds of societies through history and across cultures. These adults compete with one another in public displays, both to exhibit their personal capabilities and to represent their sponsoring groups. Typically, these contests—physical fights, boasts, jokes, debates, song duels, legal wrangles, philosophical symposia, and the like—take place in carefully protected and highly regulated social arenas. Commonly, the events are set within what Huizinga calls the “play-festival-rite” complex, a tradition-honored sequence of public gatherings that acknowledge the role of the sacred in community life and articulate the relationship of individuals and groups to one another. In such settings, play becomes the creative energy that brings the sacred to life, joins it with secular concerns, and reveals the human implications of this mixing.

Many other scholars have analyzed the public gatherings of traditional societies and the ways in which these events combine ritual, festival, and play. Some, like Emile Durkheim (1965), distinguished between the somber, regimented, and duty-oriented character of rituals and the “collective effervescence” of festivals. As I have noted, Roger Caillois (2001a, 2001b) separated ritual's reverent, eternity-seeking spirit from play's lighter, transient themes. Victor Turner (1969), who offered a more political-activist and change-oriented view of ritual, identified specific moments of the ritual process as bonding (*communitas*) and as play. Turner also emphasized the extent to which rituals and other symbolic events are performed, that is, they are realized by the energetic involvement and spirited interpretation of the participants. At such times, collective imagination overwhelms private concerns. People shout, sing, and dance their visions of life.

To be sure, there are different kinds of public ceremonies in traditional and other types of societies. Some events, like life cycle markings, harvests, and victory celebrations, may be fluid and joyful. Funerals and propitiations of the sacred during difficult times commonly have a studied and somber cast. Steeply hierarchical societies may use these events to encourage social stability

and obedience to authorities. Pertinent also are the dominant beliefs of cultures, which vary dramatically in the directives they give their members.

Don Handelman (1998) addresses some of these issues with his distinction between “top-down” and “bottom-up” play. Some societies, he explains, ascribe to beliefs that are decentralized, ever changing, and accepting of unresolved conflicts. Focusing on the rituals of Hinduism, Handelman describes how ceremonialists step into these pluralistic meaning systems and adapt to their swirling conditions. Energetically, they play, but they are also (and more profoundly) in play. He terms this pattern of involvement and meaning construction top down. Other societies, particularly modern Western ones, stress the role of individuals as the builders and maintainers of meaning. He calls this pattern bottom up. Play of this latter type celebrates personal initiative, rebellion, and creativity.

Although we commonly think of symbolic events, including play-based ones, as supporting dominant cultural themes, this is not always the case. In a classic analysis of Balinese cockfighting, Clifford Geertz (1973) maintains that the participants use play as an opportunity to express behaviors that the social order typically suppresses. While Balinese society ordinarily values orderliness, equanimity, and decorum, cockfights encourage wild betting, aggression, and irrational desperation. To that degree, play is not a mirror of society but rather an antistructural response.

Other analyses of the antistructural implications of play include Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) studies of the early Renaissance in Europe with its carnival tradition. Bakhtin distinguishes between official festivals (typically idealizing routine social order, honoring authorities, and celebrating rational control) and carnivals (reveling in matters of the flesh, disorder, and disrespect for secular regimes). This latter tradition (which the Catholic Church safeguarded) featured elements of mockery, fooling, gross behavior, and status reversal. These occasions were not just moments of personal rebellion or the release of tension. They represented the resurgence of a publicly acknowledged second world that stands against routine and periodically asserts its supremacy.

Recall that Caillois, in his treatment of traditional play, focused on two (of his four) play types: mimicry (imaginative role performance) and vertigo (the quest for instability and turbulence). Those play forms acknowledge the power of otherness (including sacred otherness) in individuals’ lives. People play to contact and communicate with these forces—and to feel themselves moved by them. The ambition of the performers is not to master the world they live in or to exist apart from it. Rather these players, as community members,

understand that they must adjust to the world's conditions and cajole it in the ways they can. This view of human circumstance—of people accommodating themselves to dynamic, pluralistic, irrational, and largely uncontrollable realms of order—has been revived by postmodern scholarship on play (see Spariosu 1989; Kuchler 1994).

I find it useful to contrast the play of traditional societies to that of modern, industrialized societies. We should also acknowledge, however, there are no neat divisions in history. Individual societies are themselves complex. Some institutions (think of education, religion, and the economy) are quicker than others to adopt new beliefs and styles of behavior. Social groups (differentiated by age, gender, religion, ethnicity, and class) may follow different patterns. And there are different kinds of traditional peoples. For example, hunting and gathering societies work, play, bond, and worship differently from herders and agriculturalists (see Gray 2009). Finally, no single blueprint exists for the modern transformation; different societies follow different routes.

Contemporary play researchers have studied the play patterns of individual societies and, more precisely, of specific groups within these societies (Roopnarine, Johnson, and Hooper 1994; Roopnarine et al. 2015; Smith and Roopnarine 2018). Many of these studies identify variations in patterns of play, forms of cultural support for play, and involvement of parents and other adults in children's activities. In a classic example, John and Beatrice Whiting (1975) analyzed play in six societies—Kenya, India, Mexico, the Philippines, the United States, and Okinawa. The members of these societies varied in their feelings about children's play, their preference for indoor or outdoor activity, their understandings of play's usefulness, and their conceptions of parent-child relationships. One legacy of the Whitings' research (see Edwards 2000) has been the importance of seeing play in this broadly cultural context. Play is sensitive to many factors, including environmental conditions, politics, religion, education, gender relations, and family dynamics. Some of society's groups advocate increased play opportunities for children; others resist them. Indeed, the concept of childhood itself is a societal—and intrasocietal—variable (Lancy 2008).

Setting aside such variation for the moment, let us acknowledge that people of all ages in societies of every type find a certain comfort in tradition. Tradition-based events celebrate, and perpetuate, continuity between the generations. They reaffirm collective values, rehearse desired qualities of behavior and character, and otherwise gather individuals on common terms. Scholars of folklore, who examine the oral traditions expressed in stories, rhymes, jokes, dances, and

games, make these continuities plain (Opie and Opie 1959; Sutton-Smith 1959; Dow and Factor 1991). Such collective affirmations are occasions for childhood socialization. They also are times for participants to laugh, tease, be naughty, and otherwise show their spirit. People often play in and with traditions rather than intone them.

### **Modernity, Leisure, and Games**

In the final chapters of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1955) presents his view that the play spirit of earlier centuries has been altered, almost beyond recognition, by the conditions of industrialism. Before the nineteenth century, most play was an informal affair conducted in the presence of peers. Because play events were set off from social routines and understood to have few enduring consequences, players could approach their pursuits in a light, even carefree manner. Even in more formalized social contests, rewards tended to be symbolic rather than material. Displays of creativity and personal style were valued.

An apologist for these earlier centuries, Huizinga objected to the modern development of organized sports and games. Monetary gain, especially from gambling, had now become an element of many publicly acclaimed events. Players were sometimes trained specialists; technical excellence was their credo. In important events, a few people performed; an increasing number just watched. Indeed, nonplayers, who had their own interests in the affairs, directed them and controlled their meanings. According to Huizinga, play had shifted its focus from the exploration of wide-ranging cultural themes to the display of an extremely limited range of behaviors, as in sport. Events were now serious, that is, they were dominated by long-term calculations about game wins, record setting, career improvement, and other kinds of gain. Perhaps the most egregious example of this—Huizinga called it “false play” (206)—occurred during his own, twentieth century. The parades, drills, sports, musicales, and associated festivities sponsored by the totalitarian governments of his era left little room for personal expression. Managed from above, play became political theater.

Although Caillois (2001b) shared many of Huizinga’s concerns about modern play, he also sought to demonstrate that some types of play have become more common in the contemporary era. Again, the first of these types he called agon (or social contest); the second, alea (or exploration of chance). Modern people, as he viewed it, are fascinated by the possibilities of manufacturing

worldly conditions—and of manufacturing themselves—through social competition. That is to say, we moderns comprehend ourselves by strategic comparisons to others, especially in situations where the conditions of the competitors are approximated or equalized.

However, we are also aware that various external factors, some seemingly random in their occurrence, influence our prospects. In modern types of games—Caillois calls them *ludus*—we combine these two themes. Individual or team success, for this is the ambition of most game players, depends on a combination of factors, including pluck and luck. As competitors, we pride ourselves on our cognitive, physical, and moral capabilities, but we also know that one throw of the dice or bounce of the ball can change everything. In traditional societies, people experience fatefulness as the intervention of sacred forces in their affairs. In modern times, individuals are more likely to imagine themselves in charge of their own destinies. Part of this control means trying to predict and regulate the intersections of external occurrences.

Other scholars have stressed the significance of cognitive calculation—strategy—in modern games. In some cross-cultural studies of play, John Roberts and his colleagues distinguished three categories of games based on the kinds of skills most pertinent to success (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959; Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962). These categories represent chance (understood as the tempting and appeasing of fate), physical skill (featuring displays of strength, dexterity, and energy), and strategy (cognitive calculation). Roberts's results—based on data from the Human Relations Area Files for the world's societies—revealed that economically simpler, traditional societies celebrate games of physical skill. Modern societies give special attention to games of cognitive strategy. Societies between the extremes of the traditional and the modern celebrate games of chance or spiritual intervention. To explain these findings, which the researchers called the “conflict enculturation” theory, they held that societies generate characteristic challenges and tensions for their members, expressed especially in their child-rearing practices. In game forms, societies frame these challenges in carefully regulated ways and encourage individuals to seek success at these challenges and to otherwise explore their meanings.

Erving Goffman (1961, 1974) describes some of the more important games as forms of human encounter. Play often temporarily transposes some ordinary situation, such as when we tease, mimic, or make a joke. In contrast, games offer cultural formats that grant direction and motivation to human endeavor. Games define the character of a special situation—and thus its collective reality—that

participants agree to enter and explore. These definitions include the overall goals for the event, the beginnings and ends of actions, the ways of determining final outcomes, the roles for players, the meanings of relevant objects, the boundary-maintaining devices, the stakes, the procedures to equalize participation (as in taking turns and handicapping), and the establishment and adjudication of rules. To use Goffman's (1961) language, a game is a "field for fateful dramatic action, a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself, different from all other worlds except the ones generated when the same game is played at other times" (19–20).

Once again, games are not explicitly modern inventions. Nor is the historic transformation from "turbulence to rules," as Caillois (2000b, 27) calls it, a sharp division. All societies play in rule-bound ways and use play for different purposes. Still, the creation, organization, and spread of games is an important theme of modernity.

When games are institutionalized (as commonly recognized and practiced forms), they permit communication and bonding between otherwise different or dispersed groups of people. Games function as a language or a mode of public discourse that blurs routine social distinctions. For the same reason, they allow new communities of interest, essentially devotees of the game, to develop. When conducted under fair or equalized conditions, games shift estimations of personal worth from issues of social background or breeding to recognitions of personal performance and character (Henricks 1991, 2006). To the extent that we value such participation and behavior, games offer us significant social status—expressly through successful performance, team membership, and leadership opportunities. People realize identities—historically, categories like sportsman, gamester, or athlete—that transcend the playground. All this occurs because games occupy societal positions as legitimate cultural worlds. When these worlds receive support from political, economic, educational, and media organizations, this sense of importance grows dramatically.

One theme of modernity, then, is the sponsorship of elaborate game forms by secular, and sometimes clearly commercial, organizations. Nowadays, organizations—and their employees—make money from the interest in games and their participants. Such consumption includes purchases of gaming apparel and equipment, entrance fees to venues, club memberships, training, travel, sports bars and restaurants, media materials, and other game-related products. Specific sports, electronic games, card games, board games, bar games, and so forth—effectively, cultural worlds of their own sorts—become the settings for

such consumption. People take pride in being aficionados of one or more of these forms. They cheer selectively for teams and players.

Much of this change occurs because of a more general transformation in the work-leisure relationship during the industrial era (Walvin 1978). Many factors—including the separation of work sites from home sites, the migration of populations to cities, the spread of a manufacturing and retail economy based on money, the enclosure and privatization of public spaces, and the redefinitions of the workweek—contribute to a life pattern in which workers have designated times to buy commodities. Included in these purchases are entertainments, such as those provided by taverns, music halls, amusement parks, circuses and zoos, and sporting events.

The twentieth century features both an expansion and a modification of this pattern (Dumazedier 1967). Advanced industrial societies have reduced the hours in the workweek and thus given rise to leisure time. The occupational structure has shifted its center from manufacturing and physical labor to technical and professional work, sales, and service provision. A bureaucratized, white-collar workplace stresses new qualities in employees—amiability, communication skills, flexibility, and creativity (Riesman 1950). A pleasing personality and the ability to develop networks with others become commodities. Ultimately, the self is for sale.

Under such conditions, the work-leisure distinction blurs. To be sure, leisure continues as a chance to relax away from the pressures of office life, but it also becomes a time to make interpersonal contacts and develop social skills. Significantly—and particularly useful in an age of occupational specialization—leisure serves as an occasion to evaluate the character of others. Contemporary people do not know much—or care much—about the content of one another's jobs. Instead, they communicate about pertinent leisure experiences (as elements of valorized life-styles) and participate together in play. They support what Martha Wolfenstein (1951) calls the “fun morality.” As she explains, the pursuit of exotic and pleasurable experiences is now encouraged as a key theme of self-development. Interesting people, or so the thinking goes, have fun. Pleasure seeking becomes obligatory.

Leisure studies, as a field parallel to play studies, investigates the ways in which people spend time to find enjoyment and enrich their lives, typically in nonwork settings (Blackshaw 2013). Some of this leisure occurs in relatively passive or receptive ways—attending events like concerts and movies, communing with others, watching television, relaxing, meditating, reading, and so

forth. Other leisure expressions focus on the more active kinds of involvement that are explicit themes of play studies—exercising, creating art, performing music and drama, telling jokes and stories, participating in games, and so forth.

Robert Stebbins (2007) distinguishes three different types of leisure: casual (which is short-lived and immediately gratifying), project based (intermittent, focused, and creative) and serious (protracted, requiring skill and training, and providing enduring benefits for the practitioner). Stebbins argues that the last two forms have become increasingly important in contemporary societies. People become serious about their avocations and hobbies. They develop these pursuits to a high level of competence. They devote significant amounts of time and money to them. They consider this leisure trajectory, essentially, a career—the basis for significant social relationships and personal identity. For many people, such play identities are more interesting, important, and satisfying than the identities associated with work or family.

During the last fifty years, a number of conditions—including economic globalization, worldwide computer linkage, expansion of broadcast media, increasingly sophisticated technology, mobility of populations across national borders, global tourism, and new patterns of political independence and realignment—have changed the conditions within which modern people live. Consumerism and seeking new experiences now occur on a global scale.

Consider especially the development of mediated, or electronic, forms of play (Aarseth 1997; Wolf 2008; Swalwell and Wilson 2008). From their origins as self-contained units permitting users to make simple movements on video screens, computer games now feature richly detailed visual and aural worlds. Player-controlled characters operate within these settings, performing actions that mimic—and commonly surpass—the behaviors of humans and other real-world creatures. Although some computer games involve small groups of players (situated in one another's presence or in nearby homes), others are massive, multiplayer affairs with thousands of people from around the world participating at any and every moment of the day.

Like more traditional forms of media such as books, magazines, radio, movies, and television, computer games allow users to engage with preestablished narratives that direct the imagination and produce emotional responses. Unlike these conventional media forms of leisure, computer programs permit users to manage some of the directions of such narratives. The movements of the player-controlled characters require adjustments by the machine and by the other players involved in the game. In such ways, players (through the auspices



of their machine-enabled representatives, or avatars) engage in a wide variety of pursuits—planning, building, revising, attacking, resisting, and otherwise strategizing about collectively acknowledged problems. Electronic formats also permit new forms of personal expression—blogs, special-interest forums, social network pages, and the like—that people create and manage. Play and display combine at levels not possible in earlier centuries. Electronically, players project themselves across the world and participate in new forms of community. For such reasons, electronic play has tremendous possibilities for learning, literacy, and creative imagination (Gee 2003).

In my own analysis of the changes that I have described, I have focused on four stages of play development, each of which augments, but does not replace, its predecessor. These stages reflect the changing roles of players and patterns of play sponsorship (Henricks 2010, 2015b). I describe the play of traditional societies as “embedded,” that is, as operating within powerful, wide-ranging social and cultural formations that the players accept and interpret. A second stage is the “associational” play pattern of early modern societies, in which participants create play-based social clubs and game forms. These changes in play accompany similar shifts in economic, political, and educational bodies, all of which center on the idea of social contracts among interested parties. To use the terminology of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1986), the “parliamentarization” of society corresponds to the “sportization” of pastimes. In play as elsewhere, individuals commit themselves to new standards of social inclusion, civility, and self-management.

The fully modern period, associated with industrialism, produces a “managed” style of play. Social organizations—governments, schools, and businesses—use play to further their own objectives. Leaders of these organizations, pointedly nonplayers, typically control the activity by sponsoring particular play forms, recruiting and training participants, establishing times and places for play, setting stakes, and establishing and administering rules. This hyperorganized pattern expresses itself in its leagues, officials, records, and canons of sportsmanship (Guttman 1978).

The fourth and final pattern—I term it “performative”—I associate with advanced industrial (or for some, postindustrial) societies. Performative players express themselves—usually in the guise of crafted personas or images—in various media settings and in related events that feature stylized competitions, costume play, and the trading of play-related merchandise. As Gary Alan Fine (1983) argues, such dramatization complicates the relationships between the

identities of “character,” “player,” and “person.” Role play of this type offers people the chance to enter unusual settings populated by unfamiliar others to engage in exotic but safe adventures. In so doing, participants reveal some elements of themselves; much more is refashioned, withheld, or invented entirely.

The changes I have described fit comfortably within the traditions of play—and of play scholarship. To recall Caillois’s theme, explorations of role play, ver-tigo, social competition, and fate are fundamental human endeavors. Enthusiasm for these different forms may vary through the ages. More certainly, different cultures configure their expression according to their own values, technologies, environments, and social structures.

In conclusion, modernity’s formally organized games and forms of media play confront age-old issues. Of critical importance is the way in which we frame the activity and the sources we use for that framing. Play, as most scholars understand the concept, centers on individually controlled visions and movements. Players take pleasure in managing situations, either alone or in consort with others. In play’s fullest expressions, these participants configure the spaces in which they operate (choosing members, assigning roles, and setting rules). At times, they propose and practice novel ways of behaving and different styles of relationships. This creativity—and play’s guiding spirit—is challenged when nonplayers establish the game forms, determine membership, set times and places for play, develop and adjudicate rules, provide stakes or other forms of motivation, and otherwise narrow the range of possible actions.

Such issues take on added importance in an age of largely unchecked commercialism, social gigantism, and transnational interactions (Langman and Lukacs 2015). Doubtless, there are benefits to the creation and dissemination of worldwide game forms. Vast numbers of otherwise dispersed people are brought together under the aegis of the game and allowed to participate on relatively equal terms. This spread and reorganization of the public imagination has become a key feature of modernity. However, highly organized sports and games (with their well-established materials, codes, and creeds) and computer-generated play (with its commonly prepackaged settings, narratives, behaviors, and outcomes) pose special dangers in this regard. In extreme cases, players simply master a series of technical movements, receive congratulations from the organizer, and accept (wittingly or not) the narrative of the setting. Winners feel themselves confirmed; they do not control the terms of the confirmation.

It is crucial that play scholars continue to respect the great variety of playful behaviors and the socio-historical contexts for these expressions. But let them

also remember that players themselves address changeless concerns. When we play, we ask: Who are we as persons, both individually and as members of the groups that shelter and care for us? What is the character of the many situations we inhabit and the distinctive challenges they present? What can we do to confront and respond to these challenges and, in the process, construct our possibilities for well-being? When we play—imagining, constructing, testing, refining, and tearing down as we do—we seek answers to these questions. However trivial these explorations may seem to nonplayers, their wider consequence is the expansion and intensification of our own capabilities. This commitment to human freedom—collective as well as individual—remains fundamental to play studies.

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