

A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY CONCEPT

by

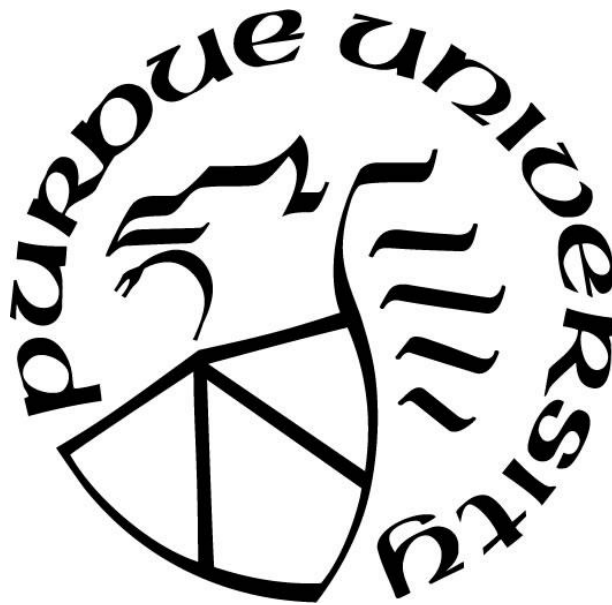
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Dedicated to my father, Kenny, and my mother, Julie

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ABSTRACT

This philosophical dissertation concerns the nature of play, a nebulous concept that is nonetheless vitally important to understanding the human being. Play is older than the spoken word and represents a mode of being in the world for many animals, including us. Many thinkers have attempted to unravel the mysteries of play but it has long resisted attempts to fully capture it. I begin Part One by defining play – a trickier proposition than one might expect – and examining the biological origin of the instinct for play in boredom and fun. Part One is a genetic account of play. Part Two contains a memetic account of play – these five chapters look at personal, human play in particular. They cover five philosophical topics: how the play concept has been used in the history of philosophy, the phenomenological experience of play, the relations between play and reason, the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of play, and the relation between play and the production of culture. By examining the discourse surrounding the concept of play in these spheres of human activity, this treatise provides a thorough philosophical understanding of play as a foundation upon which future studies of the play concept can build.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Play has been with us since the beginning. Before art, before the spoken word, even before our snouts shorted and we began walking upright, play has dwelled within the primordial tattoo passed down from one generation's heartbeat to the next. It is understandable, then, why play has always held a mystical and mythical place in our understanding of the world. Like the life-giving food and water we find in the world, the joys and heartbreaks of love, and the dreams that illuminate our sleeping hours, play seems to be a gift from the gods. Without it, life withers and dies.¹ The most important aspects of human activity – love, language, creativity, logic, sense, and the very experience of being a body in motion – begin and persist within play. Play is how we develop our faculty of reason, how we train our imagination and express ourselves creatively, how we socialize and build character, and how society develops all the wonderful things we call “culture.” An artist who loses herself while possessed by her Muse, an engineer struck by a genius² idea seemingly from outside himself, a child mimicking the activities of adults around her, and an enamored couple flinging flirtatious, teasing barbs back and forth in exhilaration are all experiencing play. Even the divine dance which governs the cosmos is often likened to play, such as in the Hindu concept of *līlā*. All these things are united under the umbrella of “play,” and

¹ This is literally true. In higher order animals, cases of play deprivation, defined as “a chronic lack of sensory interaction with the world,” leads to neurochemical and neurological mutations of the brain, mental mapping deficits, and, in humans, a limited range of stereotypical narratives and the propagation of sectarianism. Play has been shown to be vital for problem-solving and relationship development skills in every stage of life. Frost, Joe L., *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments*. Routledge. London, UK. 2010. Brown, S. and J. Lomax. Hogg Foundation Grant, “A Pilot Study of Young Murderers”. 1967. Freedman, D.A. and Brown, S.L., *On the Role of Coenesthetic Stimulation in the Evolution of Psychic Structure*. Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1968. 37:418-438. Brown, S.L. “Play, How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul”. Avery Penguin Press. New York, NY. 2009.

Panksepp, Jaak and Lucy Rivin. *The Archaeology of Mind*. W.W. Norton & Co. 2012.

² A Latin word for one's tutelary spirit or daemonic guide, which by the late 16th century came to refer to the individual himself.

this dissertation seeks to illuminate what it is that all these things have in common, what unites them all as aspects of play, and how play informs our lives as human beings.

Despite, or perhaps due to, the incredible ubiquity of play in our lives, it has been tremendously difficult to determine what, exactly, play *is*, although plenty of ink has been spilled in the attempt. The incompleteness of our understanding of play can perhaps best be summarized by Wittgenstein's use of "games" as an example of his notion of family resemblance.³ To wit, he claims there is nothing essential about games that unites them as a single concept. Instead, he suggests that the only thing all games have in common is that they have historically been called games and while some games resemble others, there is no one thing that is present in all examples. In other words, he claims there is no *essential* definition of "game." Many scholars have since taken up Wittgenstein's challenge to define the essence of games and its broader parent-concept within which all games (and many other activities) are found: play.⁴

For much of human history, play was primarily seen as opposed to work, necessary only insofar as it allows one to work more efficiently later on (a view espoused by Plato, Aristotle, and many of the thinkers who followed in their tradition). Truly unbounded play was thus permissible only for children – those who did not work yet and needed play in order to learn how

³ "Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'' – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! – Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ballgames, much that is common is retained, but much is lost... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. – overlap and crisscross in the same way. And I shall say: 'games' form a family." (*Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein, §66-67)

⁴ Bernard Suits has, in my mind, best captured the essence of *games* (not *play*) in his definition: "To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]." In simpler terms, a game is "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, Broadview Press, 1978. p. 54).

to become a worker later in life – and the wealthy – who no longer needed to work and could *indulge* in play. It is only relatively recently that we have recognized an ancient truth: play is neither opposed nor subordinated to production.

Relatively recently, new truths about the nature of play, long obscured by its ubiquity, have come to light. Play's role in childhood development has been well studied and established. Digital technology and global culture⁵ have rendered visible the growing importance of play. The global videogaming market is set to reach \$256.97 billion by 2025.⁶ As of August 2020 there were an estimated 3.1 billion people consuming video games, representing around 40% of the population of the planet.⁷ The global market value of board games, alternatively known as tabletop games, was estimated to be around \$7.2 billion in 2017 and was forecast to reach a value of \$12 billion by 2023.⁸ Play is more sophisticated than it's ever been, with today's videogames and tabletop games demonstrating what play systems can do – the level of sophistication in these game systems is awe-inspiring and is being pushed ever higher. Due in part to this success, we know now more than ever how the benefits of play continue fostering physical and psychological development well into adulthood, play's role in innovation and progress in every field imaginable, and the necessity of play in human and animal flourishing in

⁵ Digital technology has freed game design from many material limitations while accelerating the rate of design development. This encourages experimentation and allows us to easily see which game design elements work and which do not, shedding light on the broader picture of the evolutionary processes of the development of play. Global culture, especially as it relates to capitalism, has also helped reveal the components of play by ironing out and accounting for cultural differences which confused early attempts at an essential, cross-cultural definition of play – for example, some cultures consider gambling degenerate and thus not a form of play, while others laud it as a nearly religious activity. Thus, the former would define play so as to exclude gambling while the latter would be sure their definition includes, or even focuses, on elements of chance.

⁶ Dobrilova, Teodora. "How Much Is the Gaming Industry Worth in 2021?". TechJury.net. <https://techjury.net/blog/gaming-industry-worth>. Retrieved 9/21/2021. Back in 2019, this figure was around \$151.55 billion. Gaming industry stats show that the industry is forecast to grow at a rate of 9.17% from 2020 to 2025.

⁷ "Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends and Data In 2021". WePC.com. <https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/>. Retrieved 9/21/2021.

⁸ Bedford, Emma (Publisher). "Global board games market value from 2017 to 2023". <https://www.statista.com/statistics/829285/global-board-games-market-value/>. Statista.com. 8/9/2019. Retrieved 9/21/2021.

general. These qualities hint at an essence of play beyond its functional origins in evolutionary biology, psychology, and sociology; they suggest an image of play that is done for its own sake but is nonetheless of the highest utility, that comes from within as well as without, and that tells us more about ourselves than we ever thought possible.

In this dissertation, which is a treatise on play, I will be putting forth my theory of play – a broad, synthetic definition which captures all forms of play but includes nothing that is not play. Armed with an “image” of what play is, I will examine where play comes from, what it does, and what it tells us about where we might go and how we might get there. There is now a field of study about play – game studies is barely a century old and although important work is being done within this discipline, it is still very much a burgeoning frontier. While many studies have been done about the use of play in certain fields, a synthetic account that takes these studies into account is yet to be made. Play itself remains elusive, divorced from what it can do.

Following the advice of Brian Sutton-Smith, who wrote a comprehensive analysis of the interdisciplinary confusion surrounding the topic in *The Ambiguity of Play*, I believe play can only be fully illumined in a philosophical approach, rather than a design-focused industrial approach, education-focused developmental approach, physiologically-focused evolutionary approach, or an anthropologically-focused sociological approach, all of which feature in the history of the study of play. This treatise is not a guide to game design, though game design will come up in the discussion. This treatise – more philosophical than technical – is my attempt to consolidate these disparate perspectives on play and unite them into a full(er) image of the play concept. Rather than focusing on a certain thinker or specific field, this treatise will instead be about the play phenomenon itself, and its profound influence in philosophy, culture, and human

life. By understanding the structure and role of play in our lives, I aim to bring new clarity to the topic of play and provide a foundation upon which future play theorists can build.

Flashes of insight into the true nature of play throughout history have predominately come from philosophers and scientists. However, like lightning, these flashes illuminate the subject of play but for a brief moment and incompletely. These flashes can be seen in Plato's account of learning through play and again in Dewey's. They can be found in Schiller's or Danto's theories about the creation of art, in Nietzsche's or Kant's thoughts on ethics in terms of one's character, in Foucault's account of social control, and in Deleuze and Guattari's account of how desiring-production organizes social formations. Deleuze's own philosophical style (he would resent me calling it a "method") is a spotlight on play in philosophy – he calls philosophy "the creation of new concepts" and sets about it by reinterpreting past philosophers and playfully recombining those ideas with his own, "producing an offspring which is recognizably his, yet also monstrous and different." Nietzsche's philosophical body of work features an emphasis on play as innocent, autotelic⁹ creation and destruction, be they natural forces or human ones. Whether it be playing animals or children, playful words and artworks, playing games alone and with others, playful customs and traditions, playing the market, or playful philosophy, these flashes of insight into play can be found scattered across the history of the humanities and sciences. Due to the relative cultural homogeneity wrought by global capitalism and the dissemination of digital technology accelerating the evolution of material culture ever more quickly, for perhaps for the first time in human history we are able to combine all of these partial illuminations into a composite, and we can begin to see the shape of the subject of play in its entirety.

⁹ "Autotelic" refers to an activity or a creative work having an end or purpose in itself.

We are living in the era of play – play is quickly becoming the dominant form of global culture, a multi-billion-dollar commercial powerhouse, and the go-to method for sparking innovation and creativity in industry. This new image of play that I will be elucidating is what play has always been, but it has been rendered visible only recently, and while one analysis cannot possibly detail such a massive topic in full, I believe I can define and identify play and begin a thorough examination of its nature. That is what I plan to do: a philosophical analysis of a new, more complete image of play. In each of these chapters, I will look at both how play influences or informs the topic and how the topic affects play. I will take Wittgenstein’s advice and “Don’t think, but look!”¹⁰ – only after perceiving what play essentially *is* are we properly able to judge what it might tell us about culture, meaning, and life.

1.1 Roadmap for the Dissertation

In Part One “The Genetic Account of Play,” which covers chapters 1, 2, and 3, I review some of the many attempts that have been made to satisfactorily define play, explain the impersonal nature of cosmic play, and pinpoint the origin of the instinct for play found in many species of animals (including humans).

In Chapter 2, *Glóssa*, I set about the task of defining play to establish what it is I am writing about – a necessary first-step in explicating the nature of play. I will provide an essential definition of play – what play is at its most basic and fundamental level – as well as a brief overview of modern play theory, which I describe as three successive “waves.” I also propose a

¹⁰ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, §66. Accessed at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54889e73e4b0a2c1f9891289/t/564b61a4e4b04eca59c4d232/1447780772744/Ludwig.Wittgenstein.-.Philosophical.Investigations.pdf> Retrieved 10/14/2021.

useful distinction between two broad kinds of play – cosmic play and animal play – a distinction that will prove vitally important for subsequent topics.

In Chapter 3, *Phýsis*, I look at the origin of the instinct for play found in people and many animals. At this level, the animal play in which animals (including humans) engage is understood as the result of a two-fold instinct towards fun and away from boredom – both of which have evolved to ensure the animals who play do so. Then I describe three nonessential (because they are unique to animal play, and are not present in many forms of cosmic play) aspects of play as found in animals: 1) creativity as bricolage, 2) contests and sport, and 3) honor as a social force.

In Part Two, “The Memetic Account of Play,” I turn my attention to animal play – human play, specifically. I begin my examination of human play with philosophy to provide a backdrop against which the subsequent chapters can be better understood. In Chapter 4, *Sophia*, I present a history of how the play concept has been used in philosophical discourse, a topic investigated thoroughly by Mihai I. Spariosu in *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Following Spariosu, I trace a particular lineage of thought through the Western tradition that has play operating in ever-increasingly important roles, especially with the line of thinkers he calls the “artist-metaphysicians.” I begin in Ancient Greece with how Plato and Aristotle understand the play concept, tracing their influence through philosophers of the Middle Ages like St. Thomas Aquinas, and how their views on the play concept culminate with Immanuel Kant’s rather negative treatment of the play concept, subordinated to Reason. Then, an important turn begins with Friedrich Schiller, who, while still in the Platonic tradition, places the play concept at the center of his philosophical system. By referring to Presocratic thinkers like Heraclitus, Friedrich Nietzsche then turns the Platonic tradition on its head and values play precisely for its irrational, impersonal qualities – here we

can understand Nietzsche's move as subordinating animal play to cosmic play, which he lauds for its blind innocence and autotelic nature (both qualities of a child at play). In the wake of Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and those who follow him, including Eugen Fink and Hans-Georg Gadamer in Germany as well as Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida in France, latch onto this aesthetic view of life centered around the play concept. Finally, I look at American philosopher James S. Hans's underappreciated 1981 book *The Play of the World* which sees the Presocratic tradition restarted by Nietzsche culminate in a philosophical system that places the play concept front and center as the primary organizing principle of the world.

The chapters following Chapter 4 are arranged by topic in ascending order of complexity, with the most fundamental level of human activity coming first and ending with the most complicated level of human activity. The topics are: 5) the phenomenological experience of play, 6) the relation between logic and reason to play, 7) the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of play, and 8) play's role in the production of culture.

In Chapter 5, *Óntōs*, I take a closer look at the phenomenological experience of play. Play is a fundamental mode of being in the world; it gives us a structure of experience that is marked by intentionality and interactivity. This insight is expounded upon by the founding father of phenomenology Edmund Husserl. His student, Eugen Fink, wrote *Play as Symbol of the World* in 1960 about the play concept as it relates to the being's relation to the world in which they encounter events and other beings. Then I look at the "irreality of child phantasmagoria" – the real-but-not-real nature of play – as explained by Brian Sutton-Smith in his 1997 book *The Ambiguity of Play*. I also address Martin Heidegger's work on the concept of boredom as it relates to the experience of fun via play. Lastly, I present the work Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has

done on the psychological concept of “flow” – a positive type of experience many players have while playing.

In Chapter 6, *Lógos*, I look at a cluster of topics related to the connection between play and reason, logic, and knowledge. The relation between play and learning is well-documented – I look at some core ideas about play and literacy, childhood development, and the nature of amusement. The central concept in this chapter is unpredictability and its role in evoking the pleasure of fun for those who try to predict outcomes. I turn to Deleuze to explicate the relationship between unpredictability in games and the positive reaction they produce in us as we try to use reason to predict outcomes during a play activity. I then turn to the concepts of strategy, optimization, and “playing well.” I will discuss how game theory – a branch of mathematics and decision theory – plays a role in this epistemic view of game-playing.

In Chapter 7, *Ethos*, I explore the relations between play and aesthetics, play and ethics, and how aesthetics and ethics relate to each other through play. First, I present a brief history of the study of aesthetics and the role play has in the creation of art. I explore the idea that play itself can have aesthetic value, in addition to the obvious use of visual art in the presentation of games. Then I turn to the relation between play and ethics, namely, that play naturally has an ethical dimension to it. I compare following the rules (written and unwritten) of the game to being a member of a State, and I explore the dichotomy of sportsmanship (following in the spirit of the game) and gamesmanship (exploiting the rules of the game to maximize one’s advantages). Then I look at the ethical value of play – how humans use play to teach social values and positive virtues to players. Lastly, I investigate an interesting and important move many thinkers have made: providing an aesthetic answer to the ethical question of “what ought

one do?” From process philosophy to practical philosophy, I look at several attempts that philosophers have made to make such an answer, Nietzsche being chief among them.

In Chapter 8, *Nómos*, I expound upon the thesis put forth by Johan Huizinga, the father of game studies, in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens* that the origin of all culture can be traced back to play activities. I track the movement from our instinct for play to the production of cultural values and artifacts – from genetic to memetic. Play, I argue, is best understood as a rhizome, a multiplicity. Our attempts to account for what is or is not play must contend with play’s paradoxically infinite potential – anything *can be* play, but not everything *is* play. Thus, to understand play’s role in the creation of our culture, we must look at play not as a static concept but as a flow that is ever-changing and evolving as we play.

In Chapter 9, *Paízo*, I provide a summary of the topics explored in this treatise and close with some remarks about play in general that aim towards future explorations of the play concept. Having clarified the discourse about play, this treatise will provide a useful framework for future studies involving play.

Play is an important aspect of life, and is essential to human flourishing. No picture of the human experience is complete without play; to ignore play would be like ignoring dreams or love – something vital would be missing in such a picture. Play has thus always been important, but its importance is only growing. When one considers the social and cultural impact of institutions such as organized sports, the creative arts, television programs and stage productions, not to mention the ever-expanding array of videogames and tabletop or board games – it quickly becomes apparent that intellectual interest in play is vastly less than it ought to be, given the many ways play touches our lives. Economic impact aside, at a much more basic level, nearly everyone’s childhood is defined by the games they play. Play makes us who we are in a very

direct and powerful way. We live in a world that is becoming more and more infused with play, but there is still much more to discover about this amorphous and challenging topic. In this dissertation, I aim to investigate the concept of play and lay a foundational understanding of what play is, how it colors our world, and how it makes us who we are.

PART ONE (CHAPTERS 2 AND 3)

CHAPTER 2. *GLÓSSA* – DEFINING PLAY

“The most irritating feature of play is not the perceptual incoherence, as such, but rather, that play taunts us with its inaccessibility. We feel that something is behind it all, but we do not know, or have forgotten how to see it.” – Robert Fagen

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it will serve to impart a brief history of the study of play – the sorts of questions asked and the sorts of answers that have been put forth. Second, it will serve to introduce many of the authors whose works will be referenced throughout this dissertation. Finally, through consilience, it will afford us a definition of play that will serve as a foundation for the rest of the dissertation, which will build up from the most basic aspect of play at the beginning of the dissertation to the most complex and richest aspects of play at the end.

2.1 Essential Definitions and the Task of Consilience

Understanding play requires an understanding of its most important properties. Because of this, many theories of play focus on formulating an essential definition of play. An essential or real definition is an analysis of a concept that does not merely track how people use the concept, but analyzes the real conditions of application of the concept. Essential properties are qualities or aspects that something *must* have. Mistaking nonessential-but-still-significant properties of play for essential properties has led to a storm of confusion in the discourse of play. It has been argued that an essential definition of play is impossible, or even that essential definitions themselves are impossible. That may be the case, but for my purposes here it is imperative that I clarify what, exactly, I am talking about when I talk about play, and looking at proposed

definitions is the best way to do that. Only when play itself has become clear can we move on to the larger image of play – where play comes from, how it works, and what results from it.

Many essential definitions for play have been put forth in an ongoing discourse we can call “play theory,” with nearly all of it taking place only in the past century. I understand “play theory” to be the investigation into the concept of “play.” When I refer to “game studies” instead of “play theory,” I mean a branch of cultural studies related to the question of games and the people who play them. Play is the broader term that includes “games” within it, but also includes other things as well, such as playing an instrument or the play of a lever that can be moved up and down.

It has been said that “the many theories of play expounded in the past are clear proof that the phenomenon is difficult to understand”¹¹ and that the ontological ambivalence of play means “first of all that play eludes a univocal definition” altogether.¹² An essential definition of the play concept has become something of a holy grail for play scholars, with some declaring the entire enterprise a wild goose chase. This includes Wittgenstein, who famously argued that no universal definition could be found for the word “*Spiel*” (German for “play” and “game”) – he argues that the only thing all “*Spiele*” have in common is a family resemblance with many (but not all) other things called “*Spiele*.” That’s it. I follow scholars like Bernard Suits who reject Wittgenstein’s claim – I believe “play” (and related concepts like “game” and “fun”) *does* have a satisfactory definition and, furthermore, that nothing special will be lost by our determining what

¹¹ Heidemann, Ingeborg. *Ver Begriff des Spieles und das aesthetische Weltbild in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*. Walter de Gruyter. Berlin, Germany. 1968.

¹² Piaget, Jean. *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York City, NY. 1962. p.147.

it is. Play is simply so ubiquitous, primal, and instinctive, that it has taken the efforts of many thinkers for us to finally see it in its entirety.

In this chapter, I will summarize the most important and most influential definitions of play put forth over the past century so as to present a satisfactorily consilient image of play. This consilience will require the synthesis and integration of existing information to obtain a more general description. However, it would be a mistake to view the chronological story presented in this chapter as an evolution building up towards a perfect, essential definition of play. Rather than a critical rationalist, hermeneutical approach to this history, which would see these theories as cumulatively constituting the object of the dialectic, it is more prudent here to employ an interpretive-configurative approach that sees these theories as a disparate series of incommensurable interpretations. Play has meant different things to people at different times – an essential definition will need to be broad enough to capture them all. Some of these theories have been in a contest for dominance, while others are discipline-specific definitions that hardly interrelate. In either interpretation, the dialectic changes over time and old images of play are replaced by newer ones, influenced by the philosophy, science, and culture of the time. As these contests go on, a pattern does emerge: the discourse has steadily broadened over time, and play has been seen to be more and more ubiquitous in our lives and therefore has become more important. The definition of play I ultimately present in this dissertation is thus meant to be the broadest conception of play possible, so as to include all such definitions within it. The details of all the variations of play that exist under this large umbrella definition will be discussed as part of the image of play – the essential definition will merely serve as the foundation for that effort. With a consilience of these definitions as a groundwork, I aim to build towards a larger image of play that reveals new philosophical insights to be examined in depth in the subsequent chapters.

2.2 Three Waves of Modern Play Theory

I categorize the history of the modern study of play into three waves, with the first wave undeniably beginning with Johan Huizinga's seminal anthropological work *Homo Ludens* in 1938. I characterize the waves based on the priorities of the discourse – the first wave is concerned primarily with bringing play into the scholarly discourse; the second wave is marked by a proliferation of interest in play in many different fields, which each field proposing their own definition of play; the third wave is characterized by the rise of videogames as a dominant cultural form worldwide and research focused on the degree to which play influences our daily lives and the interactivity of play as a mode of expression made possible by multimodal digital technology. There is some overlap, chronologically, but these paradigm shifts in the history of game studies and play theory provide some much-needed structure to the rather chaotic discourse surrounding play.

The first wave of play theory came as a direct result of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* in 1938, which jumpstarted the discussion of play as a subset of historical anthropology, eventually blossoming into its own field of study. The effort of the first wave of play theory – largely concerned with bringing the subject of play into scholarly discourse – peaked with Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* in 1958, which refined many of Huizinga's insights with a more thorough and expansive treatment and classification of play from a sociological perspective.¹³

The second wave of play theory began as early as 1960 with Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and continued through the 1970s and 1980s with books like Brian Sutton-

¹³ It is worth noting here that there were earlier writers who put great importance on play within their philosophical systems, notably Friedrich Schiller, for whom the “play drive” was a crucial aspect of his philosophy of life. However, Schiller did not suggest that play ought to be *studied* on its own terms. Huizinga is the first to argue that play itself can and should be studied, and thus I place him at the beginning of play theory proper.

Smith's *The Study of Games* in 1971 and Bernard Suits's *The Grasshopper* in 1978. This is when the study of play itself began in earnest across many disciplines. The second wave saw a huge increase in the number of fields interested in play, and the result was a plethora of theories from many different fields relating play to their discipline. Developmental psychologists established a developmental theory of play in children, art theorists developed theories of play in the creation and appreciation of artworks, businesses that sought to improve productivity began investing in theories of play, etc. Several important developments occurred here, but it wasn't until the third wave of play theory was brought about in the 1990s that studying play became the bustling and varied field it is today, thanks in large part to the advent of videogames as a cultural institution and as an object of interdisciplinary study.

I mark the third wave of play theory beginning in 1997 with Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* – which served as a summation of the troubles that vexed the enterprise of defining “play” and “game” in the second wave of play theory – but it was truly characterized by the advent of videogames. In the 1990s and 2000s, the popularity and artistic, psychological, and commercial potential of videogames became apparent. Consider that in 2017 two out of three households in the United States owned a console or device that plays videogames, total consumer spending on videogames in 2016 was \$30.4 billion, and the average age of gamers was 35.¹⁴ Because of the success and influence of videogames and tabletop games, play is more relevant to more people than ever before, and the advent of videogames as a form of cultural expression is the watershed event that spurred a flurry of interest into investigating play within the fields of game studies, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, and others.

¹⁴ The Entertainment Software Association. “ESSENTIAL FACTS About the computer and video game industry.” https://web.archive.org/web/20180112174324/http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EF2017_Design_FinalDigital.pdf. Archived from the original (http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EF2017_Design_FinalDigital.pdf) on 1/12/2018. Retrieved 9/22/2021.

The third wave of play theory thus saw many scholars turn away from what play *is*, and instead focus on what play *does*. Many of the books and papers published in the third wave are about videogames specifically and are less concerned with defining play than with explicating on its functions, features, structures, and possible uses. However, the third wave is also when the field of *game design* really exploded, offering a fresh take on the task of defining play itself. Because this field defines play only in relation to itself, rather than in the context of another field of study, theirs are some of the most robust and rich definitions of play yet. In this section, I will lay out the definitions produced by key works within each wave to illustrate the changing discourse surrounding the task of defining play. I will then set about my consilient task of defining the essence of play.

2.3 First Wave of Modern Play Theory

2.3.1 Johan Huizinga - 1938

The first major wave of modern play theory began in the early twentieth century. While the ancients sometimes discussed play in passing – again, most notably Plato, who thought play provided a great way to motivate and regulate children’s education – and scientists and philosophers sometimes used play to express something prerational and cosmic – Schiller’s play drive and Nietzsche’s image of the Dionysian are prime examples – serious scholarship on play itself did not truly develop until Johan Huizinga published *Homo Ludens* in 1938. A Dutch historian and professor of history, first at Groningen University and later at Leiden University, Huizinga places play at the center of his theory of cultural development.

Huizinga spent much of his career studying cultural artifacts and practices. Over the years, he developed a conviction that play is essential to the cultivation of civilization, a

necessary (but not a sufficient) condition for how culture grows in a society. In his annual address as Rector of Leyden University in 1933, he spoke of “the play element of culture,” a talk he would eventually develop into his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*. The Latin word *Ludens* is cognate with the noun *ludus*, which refers to sport, play, school, and practice all at once. He was adamant that he was not talking about the play element *in* culture – a change his editors tried to make numerous times, to his aggravation. His thesis holds that human civilization comes out of and is expressed through play. Without play, he argues, humankind would lack all of the things we value as culture – religion, economics, art, music, theatre, and more. In *Homo Ludens*, he defines play thusly:

Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means.¹⁵

There is a lot to unpack here, but Huizinga basically identifies five characteristics that play must have, a list which will guide the efforts of play scholars for decades to come:

1. Play is free, is in fact freedom.
2. Play is not “ordinary” or “real” life.
3. Play is distinct from “ordinary” life both as to locality and duration.
4. Play creates order, is order. Play demands order absolute and supreme.
5. Play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it.

¹⁵Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Publishing. Mansfield Centre, CT. 2014. Originally published in 1938. p.13.

These five characteristics give him the definition quoted in full above. Note that four of them (all but #4) and Huizinga's definition of play reflect the common-sense notion that play must be the opposite of work, the opposite of serious activities one *must* do – the widespread understanding of play that had existed for centuries and would continue to be a major influence throughout the first wave of play theory. “You can deny seriousness,” he claims at one point, “but not play.”¹⁶ But even as early as *Homo Ludens* we see play and work in a more complicated relationship than mere opposites, as Huizinga admits that sometimes work can be play, and that play often demands to be taken as seriously as possible. Despite this complexity, he starts his project more or less from scratch with only folk wisdom and the occasional observation from his efforts cataloging cultural artifacts to guide him. Thus, Huizinga has little choice but to rely on popular or common-sense intuitions about play.

Huizinga sees his enterprise as being one of psychology and history. Compared to play theory now, there was not a lot of existing theory for him to work with. Yet for all his disadvantages, Huizinga's insight is uncanny. He begins by emphasizing that animals played before humans, writing that “Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing.”¹⁷ He notes that fun is one of the most significant aspects of play, yet “fun” itself is a relatively recent, rather nebulous word “which resists all analysis, all logical interpretation. As a concept, it cannot be reduced to any other mental category.”¹⁸ I will look at fun in more detail in Chapter 3. Huizinga goes on to correctly note that the linguistics of play – how we talk about it without knowing precisely what it is – varies from one language to the next, which has served

¹⁶ Huizinga. p.3.

¹⁷ Huizinga. p.1.

¹⁸ Huizinga. p.3.

to further obstruct its essence. “Word and idea are not born of scientific or logical thinking but of creative language, which means of innumerable languages—for this act of ‘conception’ has taken place over and over again.”¹⁹ Huizinga examines in detail what he calls the play-element, to which he attributes a great deal of influence on the cultivation of civilized values and practices. Beyond this, he has little interest in classifying types of play, instead choosing to categorize examples of the play-element of culture in societies to buttress his argument that “culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning... Social life is endued with supra-biological forms, in the shape of play, which enhances its value.”²⁰ Huizinga says that without the spirit of play, “civilization is impossible” – a novel position at the time and one which influences nearly every game scholar and play theorist who follows in his wake. I examine this claim in more detail in Chapter 8.

It is really the competitive spirit of play (again, the Greek *agôn*) that interests Huizinga the most, as he argues it takes human aggression and places it in a “magic circle” of play where truly dangerous violence is held in check by the absolute rules of the game, thereby channeling that competitive spirit into a fair and culturally valuable contest instead. The fact that this experience occurs in the context of the fair play of a magic circle ensures that the participants’ thirst for honor is quenched in an environment where everyone knows what is occurring, what is allowed to occur, and what the social ramifications of what transpires will be. The stakes are exactly as high as we make them. It is the contest that Huizinga focuses on, though he acknowledges that the play-element often harbors other elements such as mimicry or creativity. Strangely, Huizinga considers games of chance a lesser, more base form of the play-element

¹⁹ Huizinga. p.28.

²⁰ Huizinga. p.46.

because money is exchanged, which he feels flies in the face of the purity of the magic circle of play and so he argues that games of chance are not really play at all.

2.3.2 Roger Caillois - 1958

Roger Caillois represents the next big name in play theory and game studies. He was a French sociologist who published *Man, Play, and Games* in 1961, building off of Huizinga's foundation by classifying play as combinations of four play-forms (*agon*, *alea*, *mimesis*, *ilinx*) across a spectrum of order and chaos (*ludus* and *paidia*). Caillois's definition of play is as follows:

1. Play is done freely, usually chosen for its fun, light-hearted character.
2. Play must be non-productive in that no wealth is created and does not accomplish anything for utility.
3. Play occurs in a separate reality circumscribed in time and place.
4. This separate reality is governed by its own rules, which are absolute.
5. This separate reality involves a degree of make-believe in that imagined realities are confirmed by the play activity.
6. Play is necessarily uncertain, with an unforeseeable outcome.²¹

Caillois thus defines play as the unification of six elements, with 1 through 4 bearing many similarities to Huizinga's "magic circle" of play. However, defining play is somewhat incidental to Caillois's main task of classifying all play into four forms. He maintains that any instance of activity we would rightly call "play" involves at least one of these forms, often featuring two or three at once. On the four forms of play, Caillois writes,

1. *Agôn*. "A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that

²¹ Caillois, Roger. Trans. Meyer Barash. *Man, Play, and Games*. University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL. 2001. p.4.

adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph.”²²

2. *Alea*. “This is the Latin name for the game of dice. [Caillois borrows] it to designate, in contrast to *agôn*, all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. More properly, destiny is the sole artisan of victory, and where there is rivalry, what is meant is that the winner has been more favored by fortune than the loser.”²³
3. *Mimicry*. “Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.”²⁴
4. *Ilinx*. “The last kind of game includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind.... Every child very well knows that by whirling rapidly he reaches a centrifugal state of flight from which he regains bodily stability and clarity of perception only with difficulty. Chess is an almost purely agonistic game.”²⁵

Play resulting from any combination of the four types also falls along a continuum from *ludus*, which he uses to refer to games as structured activities with explicit rules, to *paidia*, which he uses to refer to spontaneous and less structured playful activities. Table 1 below offers a visualization of Caillois’s classification of play with examples taken from *Man, Play, and Games*.

²² Caillois. p.14.

²³ Caillois. p.17.

²⁴ Caillois. p.19.

²⁵ Caillois. p.23.

Table 1: The four play-forms and examples of Ludus and Paidia play activities for each

←-----→

<i>Four Play-Forms</i>	<i>Ludus</i> - rules-based game	<i>Paidia</i> - whimsical creativity
<i>Agôn</i> - competition	Fencing, Chess, Football	Less regulated athletics such as wrestling or foot racing
<i>Mimesis</i> - role-playing	Performance of <i>Hamlet</i>	Playing ‘house,’ wearing masks
<i>Alea</i> – chance	Roulette and lotteries	Counting-out rhymes
<i>Ilinx</i> – vertigo	Skiing, mountain climbing	Waltzing, children “whirling”

As illustrated in Table 1, all play involves one or more of the four play-forms and are located along a spectrum between *ludus* and *paidia*.

Caillois emphasizes that other forms of play besides contest (*agôn*) grow culture, which was the aspect of play Huizinga focused on.

...[O]ne is led to define play as a free activity in which man finds himself immune to any apprehension regarding his acts. He defines its impact. He establishes its conditions and conclusion. From this derives his ease, calm, and good humor, which are not merely natural but even obligatory. It is a point of honor with him not to show that he takes the game too seriously, even in the event of ruin or defeat.²⁶

Certainly, competition is a great example of this, but Caillois departs from Huizinga by emphasizing honor won from non-competitive play as well – cooperative displays of skill, such as in playing in a band, or displays of individual inspiration, as in painting, are thus included here.

Caillois states he is doing sociology derived from play. Interestingly, he notes that people within a culture tend to move from *paidia* towards *ludus*, over time setting in stone rules and devices that were initially spontaneous and “unofficial.” This results in many of the social structures and cultural traditions we associate with play or describe as games (sports leagues or

²⁶ Caillois. p.159.

“playing the stock market,” for example). I will revisit this notion in Chapter 8, where I pick up Caillois’s suggestion in terms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, in order to account for much of the seeming instability or wavering of cultures over time.

Like Huizinga, Caillois sees a tendency in modern society to corrupt “pure play” through institutionalization. For example, institutionalized *alea* can be seen in casinos profiting off of gambling, as well as astrology and other superstitions that corrupt the excitement of chance with false promises and flimflam. This view clearly shows that, despite his call for serious play theory, Caillois, like Huizinga, still sees play primarily as the opposite of and subordinated to serious work, since casinos and astrology both “corrupt” it with promises of utility or “real” value. This view will be challenged in the second wave of play theory.

2.4 Second Wave of Modern Play Theory

The second wave of play theory is characterized by two things: a proliferation of the number of different fields that find something of interest or value in the study of play and the number of concentrated efforts to define play within the context of those fields. While it is somewhat hampered by the sheer variety of perspectives weighing in on defining and making use of play, large strides are made in this period of time including a fantastic reply to Wittgenstein’s challenge to define “game” in Bernard Suits’ *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (1978) and an image of “play” presented by James S. Hans in *The Play of the World* (1981), both of which, in my opinion, despite their relative obscurity, strike very close to the heart of the concept.

2.4.1 Hans-Georg Gadamer - 1960

One of the earliest play theorists of the second wave of modern play theory is Hans-Georg Gadamer – a German hermeneutic philosopher with strong influences from Plato, Aristotle, and Heidegger who wrote his magnum opus *Truth and Method* in 1960. In it, he attempts to examine the structure of understanding as it relates to the direct experience of artworks. He employs Heidegger's concept of "philosophical hermeneutics" from *Being and Time* (1927) in his practical philosophy, arguing that theory and application do not occur separate from each other but are part of a single hermeneutical 'practice.' In the context of hermeneutical situatedness, truth is a concept of prior and partial disclosure; understanding is possible precisely because it conceals as well as reveals. That is, just as the qualities of an artwork determines the experience of art, so too is understanding determined by the matter to be understood. Gadamer rightly thinks that the concept of play is essential to this structure of concealment/unconcealment. Gadamer brings in this structure because he prefers a conception of understanding that is enabled by our finitude, rather than being hindered by it. Thus, art, like all play, is not a disinterested exercise of subjectivity, as art is for Kant, but rather has a structure of its own to which one is given over.

Because play has an important role in Gadamer's hermeneutics and theory of art, he dedicates quite a lot of attention to its ontological structure.

If we examine how the word "play" is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end. Correlatively, the word "Spiel" originally meant "dance," and is still found in many word forms (e.g., in Spielmann, jongleur). The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. The movement of play as such has, as it were, no substrate. It is the game that is played – it is irrelevant whether

or not there is a subject who plays it. The play is the occurrence of movement as such.²⁷

Gadamer argues that play is a mode of being of the artwork itself, not just the artist's intention or method of creation. Gadamer goes so far as to suggest that art is thus the closest human beings come to the divine play of existence, since play is involved in both art's creation and its interpretation. What is key here in the context of play studies is the notion of impersonal or cosmic play – a conception of play out there in the world that does not depend upon human or animal subjectivity. Animal play is the focus of many play scholars, but Gadamer rightly identifies a prerational form of play as coming prior to any lived experience. For example, light can play across the water even if nobody is there to make the judgement that it is play. Gadamer is only concerned about play in the context of art, but there is a lot to unpack here regarding an impersonal, cosmic sense of play, which I will revisit in detail later.

2.4.2 Bernard Suits - 1978

A Professor of Philosophy at the University of Waterloo, Bernard Suits sets out in *The Grasshopper: Games, Play, and Utopia* in 1978 to take on Wittgenstein's challenge that a universal definition of "game" is impossible. That is, one cannot express a definition of "game" which captures everything that is a game and nothing that is not. Suits responds in a humorous little book which also serves as a sequel to Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ant by defining "game" as follows:

To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means

²⁷ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 1960. p.108.

[constitutive rules], and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude].²⁸

Or, put more simply, game-playing is “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”²⁹

By the 1970s, play theory had turned its collective attention to the difficult task of defining many of the terms which appear again and again in the discussion of play: “fun,” “creativity,” and “game” among them. Bernard Suits wrote *The Grasshopper: Life, Games, and Utopia* in order to address the concept of “game,” not “play,” but as Huizinga noted most languages have a single word for both play and game, and so they have definitions which are inextricably linked. Taking to the task of defining “game,” Suits uses Platonic-style dialogues, thought experiments, and other philosophical methods of inquiry, and the definition of “game” he produces is, I believe, still the one of the best. Suits’ larger argument in *The Grasshopper* is also fascinating – he suggests that, were one to be lucky enough to live in a true utopia, where instrumental needs are met easily and freely, the only activity that would make any sense at all would be play. Suits’ book demonstrates how play theory is taken in by a field (in Suits’ case, philosophy) and analyzed in that field’s terms. Another major turn play theory takes in the second wave is the psychological turn.

2.4.3 Lev Vygotsky and Daniel Elkonin - 1978

Lev Vygotsky and his student Daniel Elkonin are two Soviet psychologists who are founders of the cultural-historical approach to psychology which views people as an inseparable unity of mind, brain and culture. Both men studied and wrote extensively on the psychological

²⁸ Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Ontario: Broadview Press. 1978. p.34.

²⁹ Suits. p.41.

benefits of and need for play in children. Vygotsky's "The Role of Play in Development" in 1978 and Elkonin's *The Psychology of Play* later that same year represent another major turn play theory makes in the 1970s – the psychological turn. Vygotsky defines play as a behavioral phenomenon.

[Children's] play is an activity that is (a) desired by the child, (b) always involves an imaginary situation, and (c) always involves rules which are in the minds of the players and may or may not be laid down in advance.³⁰

The discourse of game studies at this time seeks to be more scientific and rely more on quantifiable data rather than anecdotal experiences. In his psychological approach to the subject of play, Vygotsky moves the clinical side of the discussion towards a more robust notion of the developmental, instinctual side of play but away from the notion of simple pleasure at the root of the play instinct. Play anticipates the development of cognition in a way that is more complex than simply providing training for important survival-related tasks (i.e., how to fight, how to hunt, etc.), although that element is there.

To define play as an activity that gives pleasure to the child is inaccurate for two reasons. First, many activities give the child much keener experiences of pleasure than play, for example, sucking a pacifier, even though the child is not being satiated. And second, there are games in which the activity itself is not pleasurable, for example, games, predominantly at the end of preschool and the beginning of school age, that give pleasure only if the child finds the result interesting. Sporting games (not only athletic sports, but other games that can be won or lost) are very often accompanied by displeasure when the outcome is unfavorable to the child. But while pleasure cannot be regarded as the defining characteristic of play, it seems to me that theories which ignore the fact that play fulfills children's needs result in a pedantic intellectualization of play.³¹

Vygotsky tested and refined his basic principles of play by studying it in early childhood. He found that preschoolers overcame the impulsiveness they had as toddlers by using their make-believe play to develop the intentional behavior that is fundamental to higher mental functions.

³⁰ Vygotsky, Lev S. "The Role of Play in Development" 1978. p.92-104.

³¹ Vygotsky. p.1.

Vygotsky's student and colleague, Daniel Elkonin, further expanded his teacher's findings into an even more robust Vygotskian theory of play emphasizing the model of reality make-believe constructs, allowing children to use symbols in two ways: first, using objects in their symbolic function and second when they act out a symbolic representation of relationships that exist between their role models.³²

2.4.4 James S. Hans - 1981

In *The Play of the World* in 1981, James S. Hans defines play as a “structuring activity” that brings understanding.

I want to suggest a definition of play that points to an activity, that points to [a] fundamental activity of man, the back-and-forth movement of encounter and exchange with the world in which man is continually engaged. But if play is an activity, it is not merely a random participation in the process of the world and it is not a substitute for the word “process” or the word “flux.” It is a structuring activity, the activity out of which understanding comes. Play is at one and the same time the location where we question our structures of understanding and the location where we develop them...³³

Much of his theory hinges on the structures of desire and production, and he turns to Freud, Marx, Gadamer, and especially Deleuze and Guattari to explicate his theory of play.

Play, production and desire come together insofar as play always involved and is always a part of production and desire. The relationship these words share is global in scope, affecting not only all of what we call “culture,” but also all of what we call “nature.”³⁴

Hans emphasizes the imminent, experiential element of play, drawing a sharp distinction between his theories and those of Huizinga and Caillois, who he says relegates play to its own privileged sphere of activity (one is reminded of Huizinga's “magic circle” theory of play).

³² Elkonin, Daniel. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 1, January-February 2005. p.11-21.

³² Hans, James S. *The Play of the World*. Univ of Massachusetts Press. 1981. p.x.

³⁴ Hans. p.xi.

Play is an experiential mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world, and of all experience within such a mode is confirmed or denied in the playing-out of the experience. This understanding is by no means confined to the play of cognitive activity alone, though that kind of play is important. Play also provides understanding in other realms, testing the give and take between one's body and some aspect of the world, learning the points of resistance and the points of flow or connection. It can thus occur at many levels, and at each level something is understood and worked through that could not be understood or worked through in any other way.³⁵

Play thus provides the context for experiences that can negate previous experiences such that we come to understand that things are not the way we thought they were. This “back-and-forth” element of play – from ontology to epistemology and back again – “begins with the putting-in-question, and proceeds, ideally, until some further understanding of that which has been put into question has been achieved.”³⁶ “The essence of play,” Hans writes, “is its capacity to saturate virtually every aspect of our lives, though not continuously.”³⁷

2.4.5 Mihai I. Spariosu - 1989

In Mihai I. Spariosu's 1989 book *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*, he presents a wide-ranging study of the role of play in the history of philosophical and scientific discourse. An American classicist and Distinguished Research Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia, Athens, Spariosu argues that play is “amphibolous,” meaning it goes in two directions at once and is not clear. Both directions arose in the Hellenic period of Ancient Greece and evolved through the post-Cartesian philosophical discourse, eventually becoming popularized towards the end of the Age of Reason by the post-Kantian discourse of both directions.

³⁵ Hans. p.12.

³⁶ Hans. p.8.

³⁷ Hans. p.2.

Spariosu calls the first direction of discursive play theory “philosophical-scientific aestheticism,” which suppresses the prerational mentality of play in order to deal with the epistemological crises that periodically upset the disciplines of science and analytic philosophy. The second direction of play discourse is what he calls “prerational aestheticism,” which is used primarily by “artistic anti-metaphysicians” like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida as a response to attempts of philosophy and science to impose their standards on art. These dual concepts of play have both changed in step with how rational and prerational values have changed over time, meaning that, not only do the two aestheticisms conflict with each other, but the discourse in either one will conflict with previous discursive statements from a time when rational and prerational values were different. According to Spariosu, an essential definition of play must therefore contend with a concept and with terms that are utterly mutable. In the last century, play has coalesced into a feature of post-Kantian philosophical and post-Darwinian scientific discourse as the mentality of “power,” “law,” “religion,” and other such aspects of prerational human thought have been brought to bear regarding our scientific understanding of them. For example, Spariosu notes that neurological advances have reconciled some (but certainly not all) of our understanding of creativity, inspiration, and the mentality that affords an individual a totality of being, as in meditation or when absorbed in an act of play.³⁸ I will cover Spariosu’s analysis of the play concept in the history of modern philosophy in more depth in chapter 4.

A play-theorist with a Doctorate in Education from New Zealand, and Founder of the *Children's Folklore Society*, Brian Sutton-Smith sees play as a dialectical or dialogical activity. Instead of defining play, Sutton-Smith attempts to dispel some of the ambiguity of the

³⁸ Spariosu, Mihai I. *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY. 1989.

conversation about play. An essential definition is impossible while this ambiguity persists.

Although he wrote *The Study of Games* earlier in 1971, I believe his seminal book *The Ambiguity of Play*, published in 1997, is his landmark contribution to play theory. It capped off the second wave of play theory by amalgamating and thus unifying the search for the essence of play in a way that was unachievable before. Sutton-Smith coalesces much of the previous efforts to examine play in a single work, in which he suggests that play involves some degree of adaptive variability.

I define play as a facsimilization of the struggle for survival as this is broadly rendered by Darwin. Biologically, its function is to reinforce the organism's variability in the face of rigidifications of successful adaptation... This variability covers the full range of behavior from the actual to the possible. Psychologically, I define play as a virtual simulation characterized by staged contingencies of variation, with opportunities for control engendered by either mastery or further chaos.³⁹

Although he admits that formulating this definition adds yet another definition to the rhetoric of progress which he soundly criticizes, *The Ambiguity of Play* provides a new level of clarity and cohesion to the question of play, thus affording future efforts to define play the benefit of knowing what it is they are asking. To this end, he offers a meta-analysis of seven “rhetorics” or “ways of thought” of play, each a narrative with the intent to persuade (and thus, in cynically Foucauldian terms, control the knowledge base in order to enhance that community’s political power).

Sutton-Smith’s seven rhetorics of play are grouped into “ancient” and “modern” rhetorics as illustrated in Table 2 below.

³⁹ Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press. 1997. p.231.

Table 2: Ancient and modern rhetorics in Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play*

1. Rhetoric of Progress	
2. Rhetoric of Fate	Ancient
3. Rhetoric of Power	
4. Rhetoric of Identity	
5. Rhetoric of the Imaginary	
6. Rhetoric of Self	Modern
7. Rhetoric of Frivolity.	

Play theory had received enough scholarly and scientific attention by this point to warrant a meta-analysis of the discourse.

As important new research begins in such matters as the cognitive implications of play, the sociology of sport, simulations in education, and interaction behavior, it is vital that researchers and students have easy access to some of the major historical and current information on the study of games, and of play.⁴⁰

Sutton-Smith notes that, circa 1997, there are three different concepts being defined as “play” itself by various academic and scientific communities:

1. The character and motivation for one's own play experience
2. The theoretical functions of play intrinsic to players (every player's motivation)
3. The theoretical functions of play extrinsic to players (how play serves society)

While motivations and functions are important to understanding various aspects of play, they are not a fruitful way to define it univocally, which Sutton-Smith believes is one major reason why there is such ambiguity surrounding play.

⁴⁰ Sutton-Smith. p.1.

2.5 Third Wave of Modern Play Theory

The most productive wave of play theory, the third wave is characterized by the large amount of special attention paid to videogames in particular, as that medium explodes in popularity and cultural influence around this time circa 2000. In addition to their ubiquitous presence, digital technology allows game design to evolve at an accelerated pace, revealing the patterns of good game design in a much clearer light. Thanks to this rapid pace of evolution of digital games, play is discovered to have its own forms of expression, rhetoric, and literacy, suggesting that play is capable of communicating very complex ideas in novel ways by utilizing the inherently motivating sense of fun which often accompanies it. The efforts of the third wave can be divided into two distinct efforts. The first are attempts to explore what play can do, rather than get hung up on defining what play is. The second are attempts to define play in the context of game design – in other words, within the field dedicated to the concept of play itself. Both of these efforts arrive at new insights into play. There are simply too many excellent third-wave books to cover here – instead, I have picked out a few of the most prominent authors to demonstrate the typical perspectives authors of this wave have of play.

2.5.1 James Paul Gee - 2003

James Paul Gee is an American researcher and Mary Lou Fulton Presidential Professor of Literacy Studies in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Arizona State University. He has worked in psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, bilingual education, and literacy. He wrote *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* in 2003 wherein he argues that videogames have a full-blown literacy that ties into other forms of literacy in other media, and games are much better at teaching their literacy than our schools are at teaching classical literacy. Gee is interesting because he did not grow up with videogames; he

developed his enthusiasm for them well into his career as an English teacher. He identifies thirty-six learning principles good (i.e., well-designed) videogames have and explores how those principles could be successfully incorporated into a K-12 classroom. The possibilities of teaching through play go back as far as Plato, but *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* demonstrates that in a society reliant on digital technology, videogames quickly evolved into the ultimate teaching tool – they are inherently motivating (that is, they are fun with a big input-to-output ratio of engagement) and that motivating factor is constantly being improved upon with each subsequent generation of products precisely because that is what sells more games.⁴¹ Capitalism has revealed best teaching practices far better and faster than anything before, but it took digital technology to reveal these lessons.

2.5.2 Chris Crawford - 2003

Those who have recognized that play is not a species of activity, but rather a mode or approach which can be applied to nearly any situation or task, have sometimes sought a definition of “game” first, since the definition of play would need to include it. Indeed, as touched on before, “game” and “play” share one word in many languages – English is odd in that it has separate words for both. This has led some to develop unorthodox definitions of play, like the taxonomy of the “madcap array” of terms for “creative expression” posited by Chris Crawford, a game designer and founder of *The Journal of Computer Game Design*, in *Chris Crawford on Game Design* (2003). He sorts the many play-related terms out into a series of dichotomies.⁴²

⁴¹ Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. St. Martin's Griffin. New York, NY. 2nd Edition. 2007.

⁴² Crawford, Chris. *Chris Crawford on Game Design*. Peachpit Press. San Francisco, CA. 2003. p.5-6

1. Creative expression is *art* if made for its own beauty, and *entertainment* if made for money.
2. A piece of entertainment is a *plaything* if it is interactive. Movies and books are cited as examples of non-interactive entertainment.
3. If no goals are associated with a plaything, it is a *toy*. (Crawford notes that by his definition, (a) a toy can become a game element if the player makes up rules, and (b) The Sims and SimCity are toys, not games.) If it has goals, a plaything is a *challenge*.
4. If a challenge has no "active agent against whom you compete", it is a *puzzle*; if there is one, it is a *conflict*. (Crawford admits that this is a subjective test. Video games with noticeably algorithmic artificial intelligence can be played as puzzles; these include the patterns used to evade ghosts in Pac-Man.)
5. Finally, if the player can only outperform the opponent, but not attack them to interfere with their performance, the conflict is a *competition*. (Competitions include racing and figure skating.) However, if attacks are allowed, then the conflict qualifies as a game.

Crawford's definition of "game" may thus be rendered as: *an interactive, goal-oriented activity made for money, with active agents to play against, in which players (including active agents) can interfere with each other*. I worry that Crawford here is mistaking the characteristic for the essential, as one would be forced to admit, for example, that any work of art created to be sold no longer qualifies as art or that a foot race is not a game, as interfering with other racers is expressly forbidden. Interestingly, he uses Huizinga's original formulation to define "play" in the context of his definition of "game."⁴³ Furthermore, Crawford's semiotic system certainly encompasses a great deal of practical examples, but it requires an entire textbook to truly be of practical use. How does one define "goals" or "attacks" in this context? Such determinations would issue forth naturally from a truly essential definition of play and game (and I believe such a definition would need to cover both concepts). Dividing and subdividing related concepts

⁴³ Crawford, p.27.

works well enough in terms of learning game design principles, but fares poorly when applied to how we already use the language being taxonomized. Still, Crawford's efforts demonstrate the advantages of working solely within the realm of game design – his definitions are applicable across any context or discipline because they are wrought with play in mind first and foremost.

2.5.3 Ian Bogost - 2006

Ian Bogost – a prolific academic author on videogames and game studies – is an American video game designer and the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts Distinguished Chair in Media Studies at Georgia Institute of Technology. He has written a plethora of books on videogames and play in general over the past decade. In *Unit Operations: An approach to videogame criticism* (2006), *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007), and *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (2011), he argues that videogames have their own form of communicative rhetoric that afford them a new level of persuasive power, and he outlines the mechanics of how this “procedural rhetoric” operates. Because digital technology allows users to engage with enormously complex systems relatively easily, designers can craft systems that communicate ideas by means of that interaction. In *How to Do Things with Videogames* (2011)⁴⁴, *How to Talk about Videogames* (2015)⁴⁵, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (2016)⁴⁶, and others, Bogost expresses a sense that play is the key to living a joyful and fulfilling life, and he examines numerous ways to utilize play to enhance and empower daily life. In these books Bogost toes the line between play theorist and self-help guru by offering ways to use play as a mode of being in the world to turn almost any

⁴⁴ Bogost, Ian. *How to Do Things with Videogames*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN. 2011.

⁴⁵ Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk about Videogames*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN. 2015.

⁴⁶ Bogost, Ian. *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*. Basic Books, New York City, NY. 2016.

task at all into something that can bring you joy. Far from the cries of the first wave theorists who insist that play must be unproductive, Bogost seems dead set on showing readers ways to turn playfulness into productivity.

2.5.4 Miguel Sicart - 2009

Miguel Sicart is an Associate Professor at the Center for Computer Game Research at IT University Copenhagen. He wrote *The Ethics of Computer Games*⁴⁷ in 2009 and *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*⁴⁸ in 2013. Both books look at how the phenomenological experience of gameplay is able to communicate complicated moral and ethical ideas by virtue of their interactive nature. Videogames have a storied tradition of providing players with ethical quandaries with meaningful consequences to the choices players make, and this affords them unique, ethically-charged storytelling possibilities.

Each of these game scholars argue in different ways that play goes beyond games and is actually a mode of being in the world. Sicart suggests that to “play” is to be in the world; playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and a way of engaging with others. Gee and Sicart both see videogames as constituting a new multimodal form of literacy, which offers new exciting avenues of expression but also requires game makers to understand what exactly is being communicated through their products. Bogost goes a step further, suggesting that gameplay constitutes a new form of persuasive rhetoric through procedural systems. Bogost offers a definition of play fairly similar to Gee’s and to Sicart’s: to “play” is to engage with and learn the rules of manipulation of structures one discovers. “Play is a way of operating a

⁴⁷ Sicart, Miguel. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. 2009

⁴⁸ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. 2013.

constrained system in a gratifying way.”⁴⁹ Bogost sees this gratification as the most potent aspect of play, as it allows one to approach almost any task with the earnest enthusiasm of a gamer. That is Bogost’s key insight found in several of his books – play is not a particular species of activity as Huizinga and Caillois believed but rather an attitude or style (or, as I will examine later in chapter 5, a mood) that can be used to approach nearly any task. Play “is what happens when we accept limitations, narrow our focus, and – consequently – have fun. Which is also how to live a good life.”⁵⁰

2.5.5 Stuart Brown - 2009

Stuart Brown, M.D. – a psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and the founder of the National Institute for Play – wrote *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* in 2009. In his book, he examines the origins of play in animal behavior and how play helps young individuals form strong neural connections that effectively teach them how to learn. “The truth,” he writes, “is that play seems to be one of the most advanced methods nature has invented to allow a complex brain to create itself.”⁵¹ Brown gathered and analyzed thousands of case studies and found that play is vital to a healthy life, physically and mentally.

Life without play is a grinding, mechanical existence... Play is the stick that stirs the drink. It is the basis of all art, games, books, sports, movies, fashion, fun, and wonder – in short, the basis of what we think of as civilization. Play is the vital essence of life. It is what makes life lively.⁵²

Brown resists defining play, expressing a concern that revealing its secrets may rob it of some of its magic. Instead, he lists the salient features of play, which echo many preceding play theorists:

⁴⁹ Bogost, Ian. *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games*. Basic Books. 2016. p.xi.

⁵⁰ Bogost. p.i.

⁵¹ Brown, Stuart. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York, NY: Avery Publishing. 2010. p.40.

⁵² Brown. p.11.

- Apparently purposeless (done for its own sake)
- Voluntary
- Inherent attraction
- Freedom from time
- Diminished consciousness of self
- Improvisational potential
- Continuation desire⁵³

Brown goes into detail about how one might improve one's life and the lives of those around one through play and the openness it brings. The opposite of play is not work, he advises; it is stagnation. "[P]eople have to keep growing, keep exploring new territory in themselves and each other. In short, they have to play."⁵⁴

2.5.6 Scott G. Eberle - 2014

Scott G. Eberle, Ph.D. – a museum exhibitor and former Vice President for Interpretation at Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester – wrote “The Elements of Play: Toward a Philosophy and a Definition of Play” in 2014. A thoughtful paper that reassesses the search for an essential definition of play, “The Elements of Play” attempts to incorporate new discoveries in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience into the discourse about play. He suggests that play is at the conflux of six essential elements: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. Too much or not enough of any one of these elements moves an activity away from being play, suggesting that “Play has resisted definition mainly because it

⁵³ Brown. p.16.

⁵⁴ Brown. p.173.

is difficult to render dynamic relationships into language.”⁵⁵ He is after a working definition for play...

...that accounts for play as an event that unfolds spontaneously (but not randomly), that notices the volition of the participants (but still accounts for both rule making and rule breaking), and that recognizes its benefits (while acknowledging the risks). This definition needs to preserve the sense that any individual play event is embedded in a social, psychological, and historical matrix.⁵⁶

He ultimately formulates the following definition,

Play is an ancient, voluntary, “emergent” process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more.⁵⁷

His is another example of a practical definition of play popular in the third wave of play theory – it is perfectly useful to his ends to describe what play *does*, but he does not address what play *is* because that is beyond the scope of his intentions – he proposes this definition as an ongoing, onward-rolling definition, good for practical use but without any claim of being an essential definition.

2.5.7 Gwen Gordon - 2008

Although most of the scholars of the third wave are more interested in practical definitions of play like Eberle’s, others continue the search for a satisfactory essential definition. Gwen Gordon’s 2008 paper “What is Play? In Search of a Universal Definition” is a fine example of this, bringing to bear dozens of different fields of study to encapsulate the full sense of scale of the concept of play. In her article, Gordon posits that,

⁵⁵ Eberle, Scott G. “The Elements of Play Toward a Philosophy and a Definition of Play.” *Journal of Play*, volume 6, number 2. 2014. p.231.

⁵⁶ Eberle. p.230.

⁵⁷ Eberle. p.230.

Play is the voluntary movement across boundaries, opening with total absorption into a highly flexible field, releasing tension in ways that are pleasurable, exposing players to the unexpected, and making transformation possible. Transformations occur as frames bisociate and the parts and the whole interpenetrate, increasing the differentiation of the part, the integration of the whole, and the range, coordination, and spontaneity of movement between and among them.⁵⁸

This theoretical definition is also a good example of a common problem with theoretical definitions of play in general – they sometimes require a great amount of parsing and subordinating definitions in order to be fully understood. Gordon does an admirable job, but ultimately her definition is at once too broad and too narrow to be of much use. It addresses animal play well enough, but excludes non-sentient cosmic play (does the light playing across the surface of the water move voluntarily?) and play that is not pleasurable (football players under immense pressure during the Super Bowl, for example) while also requiring a great deal of interpretation on the part of the reader to make any use of it.

2.5.8 Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman - 2003

Another definition from the field of game design that shows the benefits of defining play in terms of practical design is found in *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, a 2003 textbook for university courses in game design. Written by Katie Salen – a game designer, animator, and professor in the DePaul University College of Computing and Digital Media – and Eric Zimmerman – a game designer and the co-founder and CEO of Gamelab, a computer game development company – the authors make a good case for the necessity for games and play to be studied on their own terms, rather than in the service of another field.

For hundreds of years, the field of game design has drifted along under the radar of culture, producing timeless masterpieces and masterful time-wasters without drawing much attention to itself-without, in fact, behaving like a "field" at all.

⁵⁸ Gordon, Gwen. "What is Play? In Search of a Universal Definition." 2008.

Suddenly, powered by the big bang of computer technology, game design has become a very big deal and the source of some provocative questions about the future of art and entertainment.⁵⁹

Game designers, they posit, conceive of rules and design structures that result in a play experience for players. They recognize that,

[G]ame design, as a discipline, requires a focus on games in and of themselves. Rather than placing games in the service of another field such as sociology, literary criticism, or computer science, our aim is to study games within their own disciplinary space... As products of human culture, games fulfill a range of needs, desires, pleasures, and uses. As products of design culture, games reflect a host of technological, material, formal, and economic concerns. It would be ineffective (and even silly) to try and view such a complex phenomenon from a single perspective.⁶⁰

Their solution is to divide their book's chapters into different schemas. Rather than a taxonomy of the sort Caillois developed, these schemas are focused on the task of *design*, conceptual lenses as a way to frame knowledge for the analysis or creation of a game. They bear a greater resemblance to Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of play more than Caillois's classifications, although the authors make excellent use of both.

Perhaps because the authors tackle the problem of defining play from a game design perspective, they develop what I consider one of the very best definitions of play.

Think about the use of the word "play" in the sense of the "free play" of a gear or a car's steering wheel. The "play" is the amount of movement that the steering wheel can move on its own within the system, the amount the steering wheel can turn before it begins to turn the tires of the car. The play itself exists only because of the more utilitarian structures of the driving-system: the drive shaft, axles, wheels, and so on. The "rules" created by these elements make the free movement of play possible. Play emerges from the relationships guiding the functioning of the system, occurring in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play is an expression of the system, one that takes advantage of the space of possibility created from the system's structure.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. 2003. p.19.

⁶⁰ Salen and Zimmerman. p.23-26.

⁶¹ Salen and Zimmerman. p.300.

To put it in simpler and more philosophical terms, the authors define play as “free movement within a more rigid structure.”⁶² Note the similarity with Gadamer’s “to-and-fro” definition of play. There is a tension between the free nature of play (which nearly every author cited above notes) and the limits imposed upon them when they are enacted. Note here the similarity with Caillois’s spectrum from *ludus* (rules-based) to *paidia* (free play). Without this tension, Salen and Zimmerman maintain, play cannot thrive. Consider slang words, which are only identifiable as slang because they depart from the conservative, grammatical norm. Their “unofficial” nature is what defines their use, yet they exist at the limits of “official” language. This is the feature slang has in common with, say, the “play” between two cogs or the way light “plays” across the surface of a lake.

2.6 Synthesis, Consilience, and Going Forward

Looking across the past century of investigative activity regarding the nature of play, as the topic is explored, the breadth and depth of the subject expands. Once our senses are tuned to the task, play appears under every rock we turn over. Despite the new insights afforded to us by the efforts of third wave play theorists, what we still lack is true consilience, a term borrowed from E.O. Wilson which he defines as “a jumping together of knowledge as a result of the linking of facts, and fact-based theory, across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation.”⁶³ A consilience of play theory up to this point will provide us the theoretical foundation we need in order to proceed with compiling a robust image of play.

There are many pitfalls to navigate when attempting to define play, especially for those that attempt to find an essential definition of play. Play’s ubiquity misleads some into

⁶² Salen and Zimmerman. p.300.

⁶³ Wilson, E.O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York, NY. Vintage Books. 1998. p.53.

overthinking. Consider Gordon and her “interpenetrating transformations,” which is esoteric to a fault. As Sutton-Smith suggests, the discourse surrounding play and the language used to express it are fraught with frequent metaphors, ancient myths, and contrary intuitions. Furthermore, an investigation into play based primarily on one’s common-sense understanding of it results in definitions that conform to one’s preexisting notions of what is being discussed. For example, if one thinks of play simply as the opposite of work, as many scholars did, the definitions one forms tends to be based around the notions of arbitrariness, freedom, and unproductiveness. Consider Huizinga, who intentionally excluded gambling from the domain of “pure play” because of his personal views on vice.

Clear patterns emerge when the history of play theory is considered as a whole. It is worth noting that not all of the thinkers in this chapter claim to have an essential definition of play – many are careful to call their definitions “practical.” I include them because their work on play theory nonetheless contributes to the discourse and helps demonstrate the patterns that can be found in that discourse. The first pattern of note is that nearly all definitions of play include the idea of freedom, the idea that play must be voluntary. Huizinga states that “first and foremost, play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it.”⁶⁴ Gadamer notes that “the attraction that the game exercises on the player lies in this risk [to decide one way or the other]. One enjoys a freedom of decision which at the same time is endangered and irrevocably limited.”⁶⁵ The first property of play Caillois lists is that play must be “Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion.”⁶⁶ Vygotsky suggests that,

⁶⁴ Huizinga. p.7.

⁶⁵ Gadamer. p.110.

⁶⁶ Caillois. p.9.

...the essential attribute of play is a rule that has become a desire. Spinoza's notions of "an idea which has become a desire, a concept which has turned into passion" finds its prototype in play, which is the realm of spontaneity and freedom. To carry out the rule is a source of pleasure. The rule wins because it is the strongest impulse. Such a rule is an internal rule, a rule of self-restraint and self-determination...⁶⁷

Suits writes that playing a game is a specifically “voluntary” attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. Sutton-Smith includes metaphors of play as freedom as an important component to the rhetorics of self. Brown includes “Voluntary” in his list of the properties of play.⁶⁸ Eberle notes that “play can be free—ungoverned by anything more complicated than choosing which stick is best to improvise a light saber.”⁶⁹ Gordon identifies freedom as a “hallmark of play” and Salen and Zimmerman emphasize the need to give players freedom to alter the game state and a reason for wanting to do so. That play must be voluntary explains why play has for so long been seen as the opposite of something that one *must* do, i.e., “work.”

Secondly, several writers maintain that play involves an imaginary situation distinct from ordinary life. Huizinga believes that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.”⁷⁰ This is the facet of play that he emphasizes the most throughout *Homo Ludens* as he believes it to be the primary fuel that drives the engine of cultural innovation. Caillois calls play “a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life,” an activity which is “*Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance” and “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.”⁷¹ Play, according to Vygotsky, “always involves an imaginary situation, and always involves rules which are in the

⁶⁷ Vygotsk. p.5.

⁶⁸ Brown. p.16.

⁶⁹ Eberle. p.1.

⁷⁰ Huizinga. p.8.

⁷¹ Caillois. p.4-10.

minds of the players”⁷² and Elkonin asserts that the “imagined situation” is “the main thing in play.”⁷³ Kenneth H. Rubin – who developed the Play Observation Scale at the Center for Children, Relationships, and Culture – states that “play is imaginative, non-literal, [and] mentally removed in some way from ‘real’ or ‘serious’ life.”⁷⁴ Sutton-Smith dedicates a chapter to the “Rhetorics of the Imaginary” for “all who believe some kind of transformation is the most fundamental characteristic of play.”⁷⁵ Brown notes that “When we engage in fantasy play at any age, we bend the reality of our ordinary lives, and in the process germinate new ideas and ways of being.”⁷⁶

Thirdly, many thinkers observe that play creates or projects an absolute sense of order to reality. Huizinga writes that “an absolute and peculiar order reigns” when we play.⁷⁷ Play “creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme.”⁷⁸ Gadamer observes that “Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself.”⁷⁹

The particular nature of a game lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled. This is true universally, whenever there is a game. It is true, for example, of the play of fountains and of playing animals. The playing field on which the game is played is, as it were, set by the nature of the game itself and is defined far more by the structure that determines the movement of the game from within than by what it comes up against—i.e., the boundaries of the open space—limiting movement from without.⁸⁰

⁷² Vygotsky. p.92.

⁷³ Elkonin. p.15.

⁷⁴ Rubin, Kenneth H. *Handbook of Child Psychology*. Wiley Publishing. Hoboken, New Jersey. 1998. p.300.

⁷⁵ Sutton-Smith. p.127.

⁷⁶ Brown. p.93.

⁷⁷ Huizinga. p.10.

⁷⁸ Huizinga. p.10.

⁷⁹ Gadamer. p.105.

⁸⁰ Gadamer. p.107.

Caillois notes that play “has no other but an intrinsic meaning. That is why its rules are imperative and absolute, beyond discussion.”⁸¹ Thus is play “*Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts.”⁸² Suits offers a wonderful example of the importance of rules in play activities:

In high-jumping, as we have noted, although the contestants strive to be on the other side of a barrier, they voluntarily rule out certain means for achieving this goal. They will not walk around it, or duck under it, or use a ladder or catapult to get over it. The goal of the contestants is not to be on the other side of the barrier *per se*, since aside from the game they are playing they are unlikely to have any reason whatever for being on the other side. Their goal is not *simply* to get to the other side, but to do so only by using means permitted by rules, namely, by running from a certain distance and then jumping. And their *reason* for accepting such rules is just because they want to act within the limitations the rules impose. They accept rules so that they can play a game, and they accept these rules so that they can play this game.⁸³

Vygotsky maintains that play “always involves rules which are in the minds of the players and may or may not be laid down in advance,”⁸⁴ and Rubin says that “play has structure, or rules, which are not dictated by physical necessity but emanate from the minds of the players.”⁸⁵ Hans focuses on the idea that play “is a structuring activity, the activity out of which understanding comes. Play is at one and the same time the location where we question our structures of understanding and the location where we develop them...”⁸⁶ Even the most spontaneous and chaotic forms of play involve order-making at their most fundamental level. A happy dog running through a field does so by skillful manipulation of his limbs and his breathing with the goal of moving as fast as possible.

⁸¹ Caillois. p.7.

⁸² Caillois. p.10.

⁸³ Suits. p.33.

⁸⁴ Vygotsky. p.92.

⁸⁵ Rubin. p.300.

⁸⁶ Hans. p.x.

2.7 Two Types of Play – Essential Cosmic Play and Nonessential Animal Play

Despite these patterns throughout the history of play theory, there is not yet a consensus on a definition of play, never mind an *essential* definition of play. There is some agreement on certain issues – that freedom is an important aspect of play, for example. But, I argue, the three qualities of play examined above are *not* essential, even though they sometimes appear to be. This is because there are, in fact, *two* types of play being defined at the same time, with one being essential and the other being a more specific form of the former with its own additional features. Most of the thinkers mentioned in this chapter focus on the form of play exhibited by humans and other animals – call this *rational* or *animal play*. Trying to identify the essence of animal play is doomed to failure because animal play is, in fact, *not* the *essential* form of play. The essential form of play is *prerational* or *cosmic play* – a form of play discussed by only four of the sources presented in this chapter: Gadamer’s “to-and-fro movement” as the “being of play as such;”⁸⁷ Hans’ distinction between “inorganic,” “organic,” and “human” play;⁸⁸ Spariosu’s historical picture of the contest between the artist-metaphysician’s prerational image of play and the scientific-philosopher’s rational image of play;⁸⁹ and Salen and Zimmerman’s “free movement within a more rigid space.”⁹⁰

Spariosu identifies the “rational” and “prerational” senses of play, attributing the origin of both to the Hellenes. Much of *Dionysus Reborn* is dedicated to tracking which of the two images of play is dominant in different periods of Western civilization – with “rational play” coming into dominance with Schiller and Kant and “prerational play” coming back into style with the “artist-metaphysician” as typified by Nietzsche via Schopenhauer and Gadamer via

⁸⁷ Gadamer. p.107.

⁸⁸ Hans. p.33.

⁸⁹ Spariosu. p.99.

⁹⁰ Salen and Zimmerman. p.300.

Heidegger. But where Spurius avoids the mire of defining play altogether, instead simply analyzing two competing images of play, I want to synthesize them into a single, total image of play. This can be done by placing one image of play – the prerational, impersonal, cosmic form of play – as coming before and including the other image of play – the rational, intentional, animal form of play.

After all, animal play is what interests us the most – it brings with it ideas about fun or pleasure, civilization or culture, and creativity or imagination – so nearly all of the play theorists discussed above are really only trying to find the essential definition of the personal form of animal play. They have trouble with this task because prerational, inorganic, cosmic play is really the essential form of play – it includes everything that is play and excludes everything that is not play. As Gadamer notes, “the mode of being of play is not such that, for the game to be played, there must be a subject who is behaving playfully. Rather, the primordial sense of play is the medial one...”⁹¹ It is possible to have playfulness without a player (a play of colors, for example). Thus, play is a prerational phenomenon that animals have evolved to seek out, an instinct that results in the special type of play – animal play – that brings about all the additional aspects we associate with *our* play – creativity, fun, culture, etc.

Hans notes that rocks play one way (i.e., the play of natural forces) and people play another way, but that there is a “structural similarity in the process of play itself” that both rock and people share. Drawing from Deleuze, Hans describes all play activity as a cycle of production-consumption-enregisterment, a process which affects itself. Play is “an activity that involves a structure which is continually being played, continually being altered through its play

⁹¹ Gadamer. p.108.

with other structures.”⁹² Inorganic and organic play (which I am calling cosmic and animal play) are distinguishable by the increasing potential for freedom and risk.

Living processes are capable of much more radical marking and redistributing of the local context, but they do carry the greater risk that goes along with this potential: the finer network out of which the productive processes play is far more susceptible to extreme activities... The fields of play increase with each change in complexity, and this is most evident when we come to the biological shift to the animal.⁹³

The move from inorganic cosmic play to organic animal play brings with it many topics worthy of attention (freedom, imagination, structuring order, etc.), but trying to forge an essential definition from these nonessential (but still important!) qualities is doomed to fail because that form of play – animal play – is not the essential one. Cosmic play is. As a result of animal play’s intentionality, it behaves as a rhizome, a multiplicity that resists attempts to define it as an arborescent concept with a unified identity. Animal play, by its very nature, constantly forms new connections across semiotic chains; trying to define it essentially is trying to hit a moving target. Prerational cosmic play, on the other hand, exists with or without volition, making it much easier to pin down linguistically and conceptually.⁹⁴

That play is first a prerational, cosmic relation of impersonal forces is an ancient concept. Because animal play often involves a sense of ego-loss and a feeling of oneness with the universe, it is not surprising that a great deal of philosophers and religions describe the cosmos itself as a product of the play of forces or gods. Call this the mythologizing of play. In Hinduism, “*līlā*” or “divine play” is a way of describing reality as the result of the creative play or sport of the divine, Brahman. Similarly, in Nietzsche’s works he often describes the Dionysian and Apollonian forces, and the idea of the Tragic, in terms of the cosmic play of forces. Prior to the first wave of play theory, these divine metaphors informed much of the discourse surrounding play, especially as a force of creation or creativity. To get to the other nonessential-but-still-important qualities of rational animal play – including creativity, fun, culture, and more – we must build up to it from this foundation. We must identify where and how we move from

⁹² Hans. p.33.

⁹³ Hans. p.34.

⁹⁴ Interestingly, freedom is an important part of prerational cosmic play, not as the freedom of choice found in animal play, but rather as a free range of motion of impersonal forces. Thus, in a certain sense, it can be argued that freedom is indeed an essential property of all play.

inorganic, prerational, cosmic play into the comparatively rich and diverse realm of organic, rational, animal play. This movement begins with the evolution of higher-functioning lifeforms on Earth, who, sometime in the past, developed a two-fold instinctual drive to seek out play – “fun” and “boredom.” The following chapter – “Phýsis” – will examine the origin and properties of this instinct in detail.

CHAPTER 3. *PHÝSIS* – GENESIS OF ANIMAL PLAY

“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves.” – Carl Jung

As we have seen in the previous chapter, play is *essentially* an event involving rapid, light, to-and-fro activity – the other qualities of play explored by play theory only come into being when we move beyond the essential cosmic definition of play by introducing *players*. We have seen from Huizinga, Caillois, and the other play theorists from the last chapter that several specific new properties emerge when it is reasoning beings who play. Animal play is an experimental, self-prescribed attitude or approach that imposes a structure on the world based on deontological rules and the imagination. Animal play still relates to the freedom and autotelicity of cosmic play, but several new qualities emerge within this subset of play. How does the more complex animal play arise from the essential form of play, the prerational cosmic form of play? The answer is **instinct**. Animal play is the result of an instinct higher animals have that drives them to seek out and engage with interesting things and experiences – the kinds of things they find in examples of cosmic play. Some animals are physiologically driven to seek out or create the kind of to-and-fro activity they find interesting – they are built in such a way that they find the to-and-fro of play to be pleasurable and are driven to seek out novelty. The two primary motive forces behind animal play are **fun** – a particular form of pleasing fascination – and **boredom** – the existential mood that drives us to seek out novelty. Creating play involves a high degree of **creativity**, which I understand as bricolage, while enjoying one’s play or the play of others results in **entertainment**. Within personal, animal play we also find the concepts of **contest**, **honor**, and **sport**, which serve to sublimate competition into a less dire form. If we continue to human play – a more specific subset of animal play much as animal play is a more

specific subset of cosmic play – we arrive at concepts like **culture** and **imagination**. But before we examine these experiential phenomena in depth, we need to understand where personal, animal play comes from and why it exists at all.

In this chapter, I will examine how we get to animal play from the essential form of play, cosmic play. Animal play is a subset of cosmic play, meaning it has all the qualities of cosmic play plus some new qualities. These new qualities are the things that the majority of the thinkers examined in the last chapter write about. I will explain where animal play comes from, how it helps promote survival in social animals, and its genesis in the two-fold instinct of fun and boredom. Then I will explore five important (but nonessential) qualities that arise in animal play: creativity (understood through the concept of bricolage), entertainment, contest, honor, and sport. This chapter serves as the bridge between cosmic play and animal play; from there, we will move on to human play in particular. As we move from the more general to the more specific, we shall find the diversity and complexity of play deepens.

3.1 Animal Play

When young animals get the urge to play, the effect is obvious. They chase, jump, and act with great energy. It is clearly a pleasant experience for the players and it is generally considered to be a vital component for flourishing. This is because the brains of these creatures reward their play with chemical pleasure to reward behavior that stimulates the development of the brain.

Stuart Brown, M.D., explains in his 2010 book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*:

As children, our reward for play is strong because we need it to help generate a rapidly developing brain. As adults, the brain is not developing as rapidly and the play drive may not be as strong, so we can do well enough without play in the short term... But when play is denied over the long term, our mood darkens. We

lose our sense of optimism and we become anhedonic, or incapable of feeling sustained pleasure.⁹⁵

What behaviors count as play? Animal ethologist Robert Fagen suggests in his 1995 article “Animal play, games of angels: Biology and Brain” that the immense diversity of animal play behaviors can be fit into five categories. Brian Sutton-Smith summarizes these categories nicely in *The Ambiguity of Play*:

1. isolated, brief jerky movements performed repeatedly without defense or counterattack by others: typical of rodents
2. noncontact solo play and the social play of moving bodies through space, running and jumping in a variety of patterns; characteristic of hoofed mammals, some rodents, and some birds
3. social play, some with no contact, like chasing, and some with contact, like sparring and wrestling: characteristic of most primates and carnivores, many ungulates, pinnipeds, and marsupials, and some birds
4. complex social play, which involves games with objects and features of the landscape. This form of play is enacted by adult as well as young animals, whereas most play of the former kinds is enacted only by juveniles or by parents with their young; typical of social carnivores, primates, elephants, some whales, dolphins, and porpoises
5. mother-infant games, such as peekaboo, as well as object construction and play with pebbles, sticks, flowers, feathers, and bones, and play with snow, water, and trees⁹⁶

Most animal species do not engage in play in any meaningful way. Only mammals, birds, and a few fishes and reptiles are known to play. But in species that do play, a lack of play will lead to anhedonia, not unlike how a lack of food or sleep impairs healthy functioning. What purpose does this serve? Dreaming during sleep and eating food both result in a net gain of energy, but

⁹⁵ Brown, Stuart. *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*. New York, NY: Avery Publishing. 2010. p.43.

⁹⁶ Fagen, Robert. “Animal play, games of angels: Biology and Brain.” In *The future of play theory*, ed. A. D. Pellegrini. State University of New York Press. Albany, NY. 1995. As cited in Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. First Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 2001. p.20-24.

play almost always results in a net loss of energy. Why have higher animals evolved this instinctual need for play? Put another way, how does this instinct promote survival?

3.2 Genesis of the Play Instinct

There have been several theories about the ways play is useful for survival. The oldest suggests that play behavior provides practice for skills that will be needed later in the animal's life – cats play by pouncing, primates play by swinging through trees, and so on. But Brown notes that this theory actually only works in the context of *social* skills.

The idea is that when animals play-fight, they are practicing to fight or hunt for real later on. But it turns out that cats that are deprived of play-fighting can hunt just fine. What they can't do – what they never learn to do – is to socialize successfully. Cats and other social mammals such as rats will, if seriously missing out on play, have an inability to clearly delineate friend from foe, miscue on social signaling, and either act excessively aggressive or retreat and not engage in more normal social patterns. In the give-and-take of mock combat, the cats are learning what Daniel Goleman calls emotional intelligence – the ability to perceive others' emotional state, and to adopt an appropriate response.⁹⁷

In their long-term studies on Alaskan grizzly bears, Fagen and his wife Johanna discovered that the individual bears who played the most did indeed survive better.

After carefully documenting the play behavior of the Alaskan grizzlies over more than fifteen years, [animal ethologists Bob and Johanna] Fagen analyzed the results and were able to differentiate play from all other behaviors (the observational criteria and statistical analysis are not easy to summarize, but they are quite specific and constitute statistically significant data). They found that the bears that played the most were the ones who survived the best. This is true despite the fact that playing takes away time, attention, and energy from activities like eating, which seem at first glance to contribute more to the bears' survival.⁹⁸

As we saw in the previous chapter, animal play usually involves the conceptual to-and-fro within the imagination which structures reality and focuses on an uncertain, unforeseeable outcome. It

⁹⁷ Brown. p.31-32.

⁹⁸ Brown. p.30-31.

is also usually tied up in social forces. By playing, the bears learn to be comfortable with ambiguity, to approach problems with an experimental mindset, and to cooperate with other bears, thus aiding in their survival. “The great benefits of play...” Brown writes, “are the ability to become smarter, to learn more about the world than genes alone could ever teach, to adapt to a changing world.”⁹⁹

Higher order animals evolved the instinct for play primarily to facilitate social learning and to encourage creative problem-solving. Brown observes,

Neuroscientists, developmental biologists, psychologists, social scientists, and researchers from every point on the scientific compass now know that play is a profound biological process. It has evolved over eons in many animal species to promote survival. It shapes the brain and makes animals smarter and more adaptable. In higher animals, it fosters empathy and makes possible complex social groups. For us, play lies at the core of creativity and innovation.¹⁰⁰

According to animal ethologists, the more advanced a species is, the greater role play has in their life cycle. Brown describes animal ethologist John Byers’s findings on the evolution of play behaviors,

John Byers... has undertaken a detailed analysis of brain size correlated with the degree of playfulness and the relative rung of the evolutionary ladder to which the player belongs. He discovered something: the amount of play is correlated to the development of the brain’s frontal cortex, which is the important brain region responsible for much of what we call cognition: discriminating relevant from irrelevant information, monitoring and organizing our own thoughts and feelings, and planning for the future. In addition, the period of maximum play for each species is tied to the rate and size of growth of the cerebellum.¹⁰¹

Because of our relatively large cerebellums, this leaves humans at the top as the consummate players of the animal kingdom, the kings of neoteny, who play all throughout life. Like some other animals, humans are born with an innate instinct that drives us to seek out play. This two-

⁹⁹ Brown. p.49.

¹⁰⁰ Brown.p.4.

¹⁰¹ Brown. p.33.

fold instinct is comprised of **fun** and **boredom** – one to reward the animal for finding or creating play, the other to punish a lack of play in the animal's life.

3.3 Two-fold Instinct of Fun and Boredom

Of the two instinctual drives animals have for play, fun is the “good cop.” Like play itself, defining fun is a challenge. I define fun as the pleasure-evoking fascination produced by the oscillation between the actual and potential properties of people, things, events, or ideas, thus eliciting interest by hiding what was apparent and rendering visible what was unseen. As an alternative definition of fun using Marshal McLuhan's terms for the properties of media, we might say fun is the interminably repeatable process of flipping back and forth between the figure of something and its ground. In the same way, a Heideggerian take on fun might call it the potentially endless reiteration of moving between something's ready-at-handness and its present-at-handness. In less technical terms, fun is the interest generated by undulating attention between something's ever-shifting content and context. This oscillation (note the connection to the to-and-fro of play) which produces the pleasure and fascination of fun is closely related to the fascination born of watching spontaneous and uninhibited behavior like we see with cosmic play. In order to produce or discover these oscillations that we instinctively crave, animals engage in a variety of notable behaviors which gives rise to the non-essential-but-still-important qualities that so many of the play theorists covered in the previous chapter identify – that (animal) play must be freely chosen, that it involves a make-believe world separated from reality, and that it involves structuring mental processes.

It is important to note that fun is pleasurable, but not everything pleasurable is fun. Nor is it the case that fun is *merely* pleasurable, for while it is motivated by pleasure, it carries more significance than just that. Fun is a mode of experience that demands attention through pleasure

– in giving our attention to an object of fun, said object yields pleasure. If one were to ignore an object of fun – say a movie – one would not experience the fun said object offers. Only by giving our fascinated attention to the movie will we enjoy the fun it holds. Lastly, it must be noted that a fun experience can be many things in addition to pleasurable – a haunted house is meant to be fun and scary, a date will hopefully be both fun and romantic, a puzzle is designed to be fun yet challenging or even frustrating, and so on. Indeed, the possibilities of fun experience are as infinite as the possibilities of play – a date in a puzzle-based haunted house can be frightening, romantic, challenging, and fun all at once.

The instinct to seek out fun leads animals to the to-and-fro of play. Hans writes in *Play of the World*, “At one level, novelty and repetition – and the play between them – determine the context of play, for play clearly needs both.”¹⁰² This is plainly visible in games like fetch, where the ball is thrown repeatedly, bouncing differently each time, a change to which the dog must adapt. But how is the same true of something like word play? The to-and-fro there is *conceptual* – the sound and meaning of the words are swapped for results that the listener is surprised by. Higher forms of animal life play with concepts as much as they play with physical objects, and often play with both at the same time. A soccer player engages in something close to cosmic play as she attempts to maneuver the ball using only her feet and head, but her team’s score is a purely mental concept that exists only in the minds of the participants and spectators.¹⁰³

So long as the object of play is interesting, we derive the pleasure of fun from it. But if it gradually becomes less novel, we can eventually become bored by it. **Boredom** and fun are two sides of the same coin – the two-fold instinctual drive we have to find or create play. Boredom is

¹⁰² Hans, James S. *The Play of the World*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst, MA. 1981. p.28.

¹⁰³ And, perhaps, recorded on a physical prop designed to aid us in keeping track of these mental game states, like a scoreboard.

more than simply the lack of fun – it is the “bad cop” of the two motivating forces in the instinct for play. As Hans tells us, play and desire are best understood in the Deleuzian sense of desire as a productive force, rather than a mere lack of something.¹⁰⁴

So, as we know from Heidegger, boredom is best understood as an existential orientation one has towards time. In his 1929 lecture series – *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* – he discusses boredom at length. Boredom is not merely an affective state or mood; Heidegger says it is an existential orientation, a structure of experience and a way of being in the world. Existential orientations pre-configure foreground intentional states. Boredom is the experience of *Lange-weile* – of a time that is becoming long – whether one is *becoming bored by something*, one is *being bored with something*, or one has *profound boredom*. Heidegger writes, “[W]e can see that the more profound it becomes, the more completely boredom is rooted in time – in the time that we ourselves are.”¹⁰⁵ When we are bored, we experience time directly, *time as time*. Time pushes down on us, making us feel uneasy and insignificant as the world passes us by, moment by moment, as we search for any distractions, something to “make the time fly.” The bored seek to be asleep in the everyday pastimes in their actual lives. We *like* being asleep, living lives of slumbering distractions because keeping ourselves occupied liberates us from the emptiness of boredom. Boredom is our inability to deal with time, but the existential restlessness of boredom actually serves an evolutionary purpose – it is a major cognitive force in our propensity to seek out or create fun and the pleasure (or even relief) it brings. In other words, boredom keeps us engaged with the world so that we can reap all the benefits that play brings, such as increased experimentation and developed social intelligence.

¹⁰⁴ Hans, p.29.

¹⁰⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Concepts (Studies in Continental Thought)*. Indiana University Press. 1998. p.201.

Boredom and **fun** are the two-fold instinct animals have that drives much of their play behavior. They are the primary way evolution has equipped higher animals with a need to engage with the world with the experimental attitude of play. But the relationship between fun and play or boredom and play is not a 1:1. Fun and boredom motivate play the same way hunger and good tasting food motivate eating. One can eat without being hungry, and when hungry one can eat food that doesn't taste the best. In fact, the food that is most healthy doesn't always taste the best, either. But *broadly speaking*, the instincts of hunger and good tasting food motivate the consumption of food. The same relationship is true of fun and boredom and play – they are not contravening forces but rather motivate play broadly speaking. For example, while play is often the easiest way to acquiesce to our desire for fun, **entertainment** will often do in a pinch. Entertainment is the practice of finding fun and staving off boredom by observing cosmic play or the play of others – the to-and-fro of another's play activity yields much the same fun without the hassle of actually playing oneself.

3.4 Nonessential (but still important) Aspects of Animal Play

3.4.1 Creativity as Bricolage

Besides the two-fold instinct of fun and boredom, there are other important concepts that arise only in animal play – first and foremost is **creativity**. Creativity is typically defined as a phenomenon whereby something new and valuable is formed, or the use of the imagination or original ideas, especially in the production of an artistic work. However, the creative process is hardly a unified, singular faculty – rather, creative operations involve a slew of mental faculties and social resources (and sometimes even various physical procedures) that not only vary from creator to creator, but also from project to project or even from moment to moment. What all

creative acts have in common is the sense that something is being formed out of what is already given – that originality is being forged from matter or ideas in some initial state. In terms of play, a more precise species of creativity must be defined to fully illuminate our new image of play. I understand creativity to be “the mental faculty produced by the interaction of certain cognitive and affective processes whereby new ideas are produced from old ideas or new properties of something are realized by recombining or reexamining the given properties of something.”

The key features of creative cognition are spontaneity, curiosity, control over affective engagement, and a tolerance of ambiguity. It is no coincidence that these mental qualities are also central to the idea of playfulness – stochastic, inquisitive engagement without a pre-established method or end. The concept of “**bricolage**” is a useful way to encapsulate what creativity essentially involves: “DIY” (“do-it-yourself”) is the closest English equivalent to this French loanword that denotes an investigational recombination of available materials to fashion something new. Bricolage is prevalent in the arts, especially postmodern artworks involving mass-produced “junk,” theories of intertextuality in literature, and improvisational theatre. The creative aspect of animal play, I argue, can be best understood as the playful bricolage of objects, ideas, words, or the motions of a body.

It is important to understand what counts as bricolage and how it can be used. Claude Lévi-Strauss described the patterns of mythological thought as bricolage in *The Savage Mind* in 1962, where he compares the operations of the bricoleur to that of the engineer. The bricoleur, who is the “savage mind”, works with his hands in devious ways, puts pre-existing things together in new ways, and makes do with whatever is at hand. What Lévi-Strauss points out here is that signs already in existence are used for purposes that they were originally not meant for. The engineer, on the other hand, is the “scientific mind” – a true craftsman that deals with

projects in entirety, creating new tools and taking the availability of materials into account. Drawing a parallel, Lévi-Strauss argues that mythology functions more like the bricoleur, whereas modern western science works more like an engineer. He suggests that the engineer creates a holistic totalizing system in which there are elements of permanence.

This line of thought was picked up by Jacques Derrida who extended it to all discourse in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.”¹⁰⁶ Derrida rebukes Lévi-Strauss’ conception of the engineer’s totalizing narrative, arguing that it is not possible for anyone to be the “absolute origin of his own discourse” or to “construct the totality of his language, syntax and lexicon.” Consequently, the engineer is a myth created by the bricoleur, because the bricoleur would not be as exciting and inventive if the engineer were not so dreary and unimaginative. As soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer and admit that every finite discourse is bound by a certain bricolage, and that the engineer is also a bricoleur, then the very difference upon which bricolage took on its meaning breaks down. Derrida argues that, based on bricolage, Lévi-Strauss’ discourse on myths attempts to abandon “all reference to a center, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin”, and that his discourse is decentered.

A center is a location by which all other points in an area are defined. All other points get their definition, their meaning, relative to the center. But in the history of structure, we must admit that, all centers are just a “chain of determinations of the center,” that there is nothing solid there, and that, in fact, each system insists that its center is in a certain sense outside the area, outside and beyond the system (in order to somehow transcend the system). Then the very

¹⁰⁶ “If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one’s concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*.” (Derrida, Jacques. “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. Routledge. London, UK. p.278-294.)

concept of a center as somehow determining a system, as providing a reference point, is no longer valid. Instead, we have a “system of difference,” points related only to each other, not to some stationary and absolute location—though not completely arbitrarily, not willy-nilly.

“Function” is another way of saying a rule-governed relationship between two or more things. In mathematics, the dependent and independent variables of a function are often (though not always) permitted to end up being anything; but their relationship to each other is specified.

What is most interesting about Derrida’s criticism of Lévi-Strauss is that it does not reject the idea that the myth-maker is a bricoleur in the sense Lévi-Strauss intends. Rather, Derrida only points out that there is no meaningful distinction between Lévi-Strauss’ “engineer” and his “bricoleur.” They both engage in the kind of bricolage Lévi-Strauss is talking about, because *everybody* engages in that behavior *all the time*. Indeed, *all* discourse qualifies as bricolage under Lévi-Strauss’ definition... but Derrida does not argue that such a qualification is untrue. He simply points out that it is impossible to be more than the re-assembler of pieces, the “bricoleur,” when the structurality of structure cannot make statements outside of itself.

Every discourse is bricoleur. The engineer, whom Lévi-Strauss opposes to the bricoleur, should be one to construct the totality of his language, syntax and lexicon. In these senses the engineer is a myth... The notion of the engineer who had supposedly broken with all forms of bricolage is therefore a theological idea.¹⁰⁷

This leaves us with a seemingly useless notion of bricolage – far too ubiquitous, Derrida implies, to be of much use to any theoretician. However, I believe this decentered universality is part in parcel with play – the bricolage suggested by Lévi-Strauss and refined-by-way-of-criticism by Derrida is precisely the form of creativity one often engages in during play. Play is as ubiquitous as bricolage – the turn-by-turn of a game of chess, choosing what articles of clothing to wear,

¹⁰⁷ Derrida, Jacques. “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” *Writing and Difference*. trans. Alan Bass. Routledge. London, United Kingdom. 1978. p.10.

and controlling the minute movements of one's body in an athletic activity are all bricolage under this view.

3.4.2 Contests and Sport

There are other aspects of play that arise in animal play, leading to the wonderful complexity most of the authors in the previous chapter try to explain. **Contests**, for example, are a concept that only arises when there are animal players playing – cosmic play on its own will never get us to contests as contests require contestants. Huizinga especially writes a great deal about contests as a “civilizing” agent – by transferring conflict into a form of play, there is a victor and a loser with a much lower chance of serious injury or death. This is because **honor** is an important element of any contest – the understanding between competitors about the nature of the interaction. The *social* stakes may be as high as ever, but rules are imposed that allow for conflict resolution in a more controlled situation. The honor won or lost in a contest are one thing, but if one is a poor **sport**, they stand to lose far more honor than a simple loss might incur, while a loser who is a good sport about it can mitigate their lost honor by acquiescing to the spirit of the game. In soccer, for example, there is an institutionalized tradition that says when a player is truly injured, the team with possession of the ball kicks it out of bounds, rather than pushing to score a goal while the other team is down a player. Then, when the ball is ready to be thrown back into play, the ball-thrower resumes play by throwing the ball to the other team. This principle does not appear in any of the rules of soccer, but failing to obey it is a surefire way to earn scorn and dishonor. It exists above the deontological rules of the game, as the honor it

affords is greater than the honor of potentially gaining an advantage within the context of the game.¹⁰⁸

3.4.3 Honor as a Social Force

Structures like this make sporting contests the perfect vehicle for tribal loyalties to be expressed in a way that is compatible with the rules of society (as opposed to a real fight, which is not compatible). It is worth noting that, while it seems strange to talk about animals engaging in honor duels, this is precisely what happens. For lions as it is for human beings, breaking the rules of a contest with one's peers earns devastating social exile. Human honor is far more complex, but at a fundamental level it is the same social structure enacted across many different species. While they lack the language to call it such, lions engaged in a fight for dominance of their pride are engaged in an honorable contest as much as two soccer players are. As mentioned earlier, this is another important aspect of animal play – animal play is fundamentally **social**. Every time two animals play, powerful social forces are at work. As Brown notes, what young animals learn through play are primarily social skills – how to share food, read signals, and claim territory without missing out on the survival benefits of working with others. This social aspect of animal play involves **honor**, even among nonhuman animals. If a particular creature disobeys

¹⁰⁸ I speak of honor here in the context of animal play, but this raises the interesting question of whether nonhuman animals can truly be said to “have honor.” Certainly we think of honor as a human concern, but after considering the nature and operation of honor in the context of contests and sport, it seems reasonable to suggest that animals have it too, in their own way. Some see honor as “equating to esteem, high regard, public praise, prestige, or social standing and respect. Others see it as a right to those things” (Demetriou, Dan. “Fighting Fair: The Ecology of Honor in Humans and Animals.” In Jonathan Crane (ed.), *Beastly Morality*. Columbia University Press. 2015. p.123-154.) The play interactions of nonhuman animals are sophisticated and require outstanding communication skills to keep it in the realm of play and to avoid sliding into actual conflict, yet higher animals exhibit an incredible ability to do just this. Should one bear break the rules bear follow when play-wrestling each other, other bears will no longer interact with her or simply resort to true violence right at the start of an encounter. This seems to me to be a crude but accurate description of the kind of honor human beings have in their dealings with others, absent, perhaps, the reflective, identity-based thinking that human honor involves.

the rules of contest and sport, their social standing drops dramatically and they may even be cast out of the group. I examine sportsmanship and honor in more detail later in Chapter 7.

3.5 Continuing Upwards to the Infinite Diversity of Human Play

As animals, humans play in basically the same way other animals do – we share their two-fold instinct for fun and boredom – but our capacity for abstract thinking, especially our imagination and our propensity for language and other forms of representation, means our play features an incredible variety of exceedingly complex forms. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga focuses much of his study of play on the idea that contests allow us to sublimate our violent impulses into play forms, allowing for healthy competition without dire consequences. This process, he argues, is the basis upon which civilization is cultivated as culture. Due in part to play's experimental nature, human play is expressed in a wide variety of ways, leading to the songs, foods, dress, idioms, and other facets of culture. Often when we play, even when we are very young, we participate in traditions that afford us identity and history. As Caillois notes, mimicry is a fundamental form of play, and children instinctually play out the roles they see adults fulfilling in games of "house" and the like.

Some examples of human play are obvious. From sporting events to the multitude of computer and videogames, play is all around us. But other aspects of culture are also cultivated by play in more complicated ways. Religious rituals, for example, have their roots in play activities taken with the upmost somberness. The arrangement of gestures, words, objects, and pieces of music performed in a sequestered, special place and in a specific sequence, laden with social and personal meaning, is the result of someone playing and arriving at a combination that people decided feels right. The ego-loss common to experiences when one is immersed in a play activity can lend the whole affair an additional spiritual element as a feeling of oneness with the

universe. This is not to say such rituals are whimsical or unserious – on the contrary, there are few things more serious than earnest play, and the desire to infuse religious practice with good feelings does not lessen the sanctity of these practices.

Huizinga provides other examples of “serious” human play cultivating culture. In fact, from law to war to art, Huizinga means to show in *Homo Ludens* that the play-element is the twin of most cultural practices. In the social phenomenon of the lawsuit, Huizinga sees the contest play-form in operation. He compares his time’s judicial system to that of archaic societies and comes up with three forms of play within a lawsuit: the game of chance, the contest, and the verbal battle. He even observes that the judge's wig is “more than a mere relic of antiquated professional dress” – it is a ritualistic, transformative element of play in that it removes the judge as a person and makes them instead a figure of absolute authority, like a referee.¹⁰⁹ As he claims later in the book, masks and outfits are an integral part of the play-element, and the aspect found most often employed in “serious” endeavors.

Functionally [the judge’s wig] has close connections with the dancing masks of savages. It transforms the wearer into another ‘being.’ And it is by no means the only very ancient feature which the strong sense of tradition so peculiar to the British has preserved in law. The sporting element and the humor so much in evidence in British legal practice is one of the basic features of law in archaic society.¹¹⁰

His analysis of the play-element of war is another fascinating feature of *Homo Ludens*, as he is writing in 1938, just before the official outbreak of World War II.

Until recently the “law of nations” was generally held to constitute such a system of limitation, recognizing as it did the ideal of a community with rights and claims for all, and expressly separating the state of war—by declaring it—from peace on the one hand and criminal violence on the other. It remained for the theory of

¹⁰⁹ Huizinga. p.77.

¹¹⁰ Huizinga. p.77.

“total war” to banish war's cultural function and extinguish the last vestige of the play-element.¹¹¹

He likens the ancient form of the play-element of warfare to a divination of holy validity – “An armed conflict is as much a mode of justice as divination or a legal proceeding.”¹¹²

In addition to the wide variety of human play activities, each human play activity can also be much deeper than the play of other animals. A game of *Dungeons and Dragons* or another tabletop role-playing game, for example, involves players improvisationally role-playing as characters they invent in narrative scenes written and governed by the Dungeon Master, who is a kind of combination storyteller-referee. D&D games often make use of miniature figurines to represent characters and monsters on a grid, and collecting and painting these miniatures can be another aspect of play. The prowess of a character is recorded on paper as numerical values assigned to different characteristics – a character with a Strength of 10 is physically weaker than a character with a Strength of 16, for example. Players and the DM roll dice according to specific rules based on a character's statistical values in order to determine whether a character's action succeeds or fails in the ongoing narrative the game produces, a process that involves as much creative interpretation as it does mathematics. In fact, an important aspect of the game involves designing and running a character like an abstract machine or engine, tweaking characteristics and narrative situations to maximize the character's effectiveness and efficiency. This process is sometimes called “min-maxing” or “theory-crafting” and can almost be considered a game in itself – (I examine this optimizing activity more closely in Chapter 6). This is because every game of *Dungeons and Dragons* is different – some groups incorporate all these elements while

¹¹¹ Huizinga. p.90.

¹¹² Huizinga. p.91.

others focus on one aspect over the others. Every table tells a different story in an ongoing process of play over which no one player has complete control.

As we move up from cosmic play to animal play to human play, we move out of the realm of genetics/genesis into the realm of memetics – we shift from physical forces to ideal forces. Because memes evolve at the speed at which they are communicated, they evolve much faster than genes, which rely on biological reproduction to evolve over time. Computers and information technology have undoubtedly sped up memetic evolution even further. While the animal instinct for play emerged out of the process of genetic evolution, of which reproduction is the recombining factor, in memetic evolution *play itself* is the recombining factor, the element of change over time that allows the process of evolution of heritable characteristics to occur. That is, sexual differentiation is to genetic recombination as play is to memetic recombination – an experimental shuffling of genotypes resulting in new combinations based on heritable mutations. Language is an excellent example of the form this kind of memetic evolution takes. This is not a one-to-one comparison, of course, but the gene-meme analogy is useful here to explain the threshold we cross as we move into the discussion of human play. More will be said about human play in the second part of this dissertation, in chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

3.6 Concluding Remarks on Animal Play

We have now seen how **cosmic play** gives rise to **animal play** due to some animals' **two-fold instinct** for **fun** and **boredom**. The to-and-fro of animal play features several new properties that are not present in mere cosmic play – animal play is voluntary, can involve a separate imaginary reality, and generates a structuring order to the world. Animal play gives rise to many other related concepts like **creativity (bricolage)**, **sport**, **entertainment**, and **honor**. With the previous chapters as our foundation, we are now equipped to examine in detail how

play operates at an even higher level – we shall see how human play informs human life in fundamental ways. The following chapters can be seen as a continuation of the analysis of the play concept, moving upwards in scale and complexity. I started Part One by working out an essential definition of cosmic play before I moved upwards to animal play. Now, in Part Two, I move on to human play specifically. Chapter 4, *Sophia*, is about how philosophers in the Western tradition have used the play concept in their philosophical systems. It is important to address this topic before the others, since I will refer to these philosophers throughout Part Two. With Chapter 5, *Óntōs*, I look at the phenomenological experience of play – this is the most immediate and fundamental level of human play. Then, in Chapter 6, *Lógos*, I examine several ways play involves knowledge and reason – this chapter will inspect the epistemic and rational aspects of human play. Following that, in Chapter 7, *Ethos*, I will look at the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of human play and how those two topics intertwine in play. Finally, in Chapter 8, *Nómos*, I will defend Huizinga’s original claim in *Homo Ludens* from 1938 – that play activities are the origin of all culture – by using Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical concepts to describe the structures in society that are responsible for the development of culture and how play interacts with them.

PART TWO (CHAPTERS 4, 5, 6, 7, AND 8)

CHAPTER 4. *SOPHIA* – PLAY AND THE AESTHETIC TURN IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

“Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play.”
– Heraclitus of Ephesus

4.1 The Play Concept in Philosophical Discourse

The play concept has been around longer than the spoken word and is a vital part of every person’s lived experience, so it makes sense that has been incorporated into philosophical discourse in a number of ways throughout history. The concept of play has also changed over time – most of human history has seen the play concept used to describe the vast impersonal clash of powerful forces, usually physical forces, as a divine cosmological game. I call this prerational notion of play “cosmic play.” Cosmic play focuses on the innocence of natural forces and their autotelic nature – they are their own reason for being and require no justification, a concept also associated with the innocence of a child at play. Cosmic play was a popular concept for ancient people like the Presocratic Greeks and ancient Hindus.

While perspectives on human play will change throughout the ages, the view of cosmic or impersonal play remains fairly consistent throughout history. People describe the unfolding of the world (the interactions of natural forces) as divine play from ancient times to the modern era across the globe. In Indian philosophy, the concept of cosmic play is called *līlā* and it describes the universe as the purposeless pastime or diversion of Brahman. *Līlā* is mirrored in the ancient Western tradition with the concept of *kosmos* in thinkers like Heraclitus, who thought the ever-burning fire creates all the other elements to form the world in a state of flux, of constant Becoming. Like *līlā*, *kosmos* is associated with innocence and purposelessness, until *logos* gives

it direction. While the view of philosophers on human play will drastically change in the 18th century, this view of cosmic play remains largely unchanged in philosophy, art, and religion. In the 14th century, for example, Christian mysticism named cosmic play *ludus amoris* (“game of love”) to describe the world as the divine play of God.

In the 18th century, the doctrine of pandeism gained popularity; this cosmology suggests that God took a physical form (the universe) in order to experience the interplay between physical forces, thus explaining why God would (appear to) be absent in the universe He created and dealing with the problem of evil by removing God’s ability to intercede.¹¹³ Like the Hindu concept of *līlā*, pandeism maintains that the unfolding of events in the physical world is akin to God playing in innocence, with no motive other than a pure burst of creativity. The aesthetic turn in Continental philosophy that comes in the 20th century – which looks at life primarily in terms of aesthetic values rather than moral ones – returns to cosmic play as the primary form of play and presents animal play as valuable insofar as it resembles cosmic play. While cosmic play remains in the discourse largely unchanged, modernity will see a complete reversal in how the concept of human play is seen – it will shift from being subordinated to Reason to being celebrated for its very prerational nature.

There is also a secondary play concept in the philosophical discourse in the Western tradition, beginning with the Hellenic Greeks and carried into the Romantic tradition through Kant and Schiller. I call it “animal play.” This play concept focuses on the intellectual and physical activity of a creature at play, their various mental faculties interacting (especially the imagination and reason), and play’s role in learning and development, especially ethics.

¹¹³ Glattfelder, James B. *Information-Consciousness-Reality: How a New Understanding of the Universe Can Help Answer Age-Old Questions of Existence*. Springer International Publishing, New York, NY. 2019. ISBN 978-3-030-03633-1. p.534.

For centuries, animal play was set opposed to the concept of work or seriousness, but beginning in the nineteenth century that dichotomy fell out of fashion. It was replaced by a play concept that combined the mental activity of animal play with elements of prerational cosmic play that create aesthetic value and bring a sense of innocence and affirmation to the player. I follow Mihai Spărosu in calling these thinkers “artist-metaphysicians.” This strain of philosophers begins with Friedrich Nietzsche (building off of Schopenhauer) and his *Machtphilosophie*, who influenced a line of successors including Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Eugen Fink in Germany, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida in France, and James S. Hans in America. They all follow Nietzsche and Heidegger in placing great importance on prerational and aesthetic value-making, rather than the traditional emphasis on morality and transcendental ethics focused on reason.

In this chapter, I will trace the play concept as it evolves through the Western philosophical tradition and comes to perform a more and more important role in that discourse into the 20th century. I will start where that tradition begins in ancient Athens with a look at what the Greeks thought of play and its place in a good society. After a brief note on play in medieval philosophy, I will then jump to Immanuel Kant and Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller in the eighteenth century. Kant’s use of play in his philosophy (as a ‘mere trifling’) can be seen as the culmination of the rationalist Platonic play concept first began in Athens, bridging the centuries-long gap between the Ancient Greek view of play and the Romantic tradition that would draw a heavy influence from Kant’s view of play. Schiller, too, draws from the Platonic/Aristotelian tradition and would also influence the Romantic tradition’s view of play, which juxtaposes the innocence of the child with the seriousness of the adult, but he presents play in a much more

positive light than Kant. Schiller places play at the center of the human drives towards the beautiful and towards freedom; for Schiller, a person at play is the most human they can be.

Friedrich Nietzsche would powerfully invert the traditional Western schema regarding play by not only reverting to a Presocratic play concept (Heraclitus' philosophy of Becoming uses cosmic play in a way Nietzsche resurrects), but also by valuing animal play very highly and celebrating its prerational nature as a strength, not a weakness. His view of play would influence a line of successive philosophers in the Continental tradition who utilize this affirmative, prerational, aesthetic view of play in various ways in their own works. Play has a crucial role in the philosophical works of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Fink in Germany and Deleuze and Derrida in France. Finally, I will examine a work by James S. Hans titled *The Play of the World*. Published in 1981, this ambitious book is a philosophical analysis of the play concept as a structuring phenomenon highly relevant to our daily lives, and represents (in my opinion) a culmination of the Nietzschean-Heraclitan perspective on play. Hans draws from Schiller and many of the artist-metaphysicians, especially Deleuze, incorporating the insights of those thinkers on the play concept in a concise, unified form.

4.2 The Play Concept in Ancient Greece

As with many philosophical insights in the Western tradition, we first look to ancient Greece for our examination of the play concept in philosophy. A quote often misattributed to Plato proclaims: "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." While this is a keen insight, Plato never wrote this. Instead, his positive view of play was focused on its influence over children's physical, intellectual, and spiritual development, though he does acknowledge that adult play can be beneficial as well. Like many of his fellow Athenians, Plato was inclined to view play, at least in some of its forms, as

irrational and morally questionable. Play might provide a stimulus to understanding, but it could only serve this purpose if it were governed by reason and not left to whimsy. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle continued his teacher's view of play, claiming that "children do not come into the world ir-rational but rather pre-rational. Children's play ought to be used for teaching them to find pleasure in virtuous rather than vicious habits (an in three successively more rational seven-year stages)"¹¹⁴.

In order to fully understand Plato's and Aristotle's influential views on play, it will help to take a moment to discuss how the ancient Greeks saw play in general. In "Plato and Play Taking Education Seriously in Ancient Greece," Armand D'Angour presents a thorough picture of play in ancient Greek culture. The primary word they used for play was *paizein*, a verb etymologically connected to the Greek *pais*, meaning child. Thus, play was immediately linked to childishness and was construed to be the opposite of work; with some exceptions, play was the proper activity of a child while work was the proper activity of the adult. However, this association with childishness does not mean that adults did not play in ancient Greece – music and sports were taken very seriously and the word *paizein* was used for both those activities. Both Plato and Aristotle were aware of a moral ambiguity in the concept of play: play seems to imbue the norms of serious cultural activity, yet it also suggests something "intrinsically unserious and childlike."¹¹⁵ While the Greeks generally recognized a dichotomy between the freedom of play and the necessity of work, they did not construe *all* play as childish. D'Angour explains,

Whether music accompanied religious ritual or glorified athletics in the Olympic games, Greek society took [play] no less seriously than does ours. Thus, in the

¹¹⁴ Wall, J. Ed. Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, Malcolm MacLean. *The Philosophy of Play*. Routledge. London, United Kingdom. 2013. p.36.

¹¹⁵ D'Angour, Armand. "Plato and Play Taking Education Seriously in Ancient Greece". *American Journal of Play*, volume 5, number 3. 2013. p.299.

classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BCE), the referents of “play” embrace ubiquitous expressions of music and dance, competitions both sporting or artistic, and the lively pursuit of abstruse forms of knowledge associated with the Sophists (professional teachers). We should not, therefore, be misled by etymology into thinking that ancient Greeks constructed all play as merely child’s play.¹¹⁶

The Greeks saw play as the proper activity of the child, but they also saw some virtue in the innocence and self-guided nature of childish play – a notion that would fall out of fashion in the Middle Ages and would not return until Nietzsche revives it in the 19th century.

A related notion was *paideia* – a word for “education,” “training,” or “culture” – which referred to nurturing the intellect and creative accomplishment of the denizens of the city.¹¹⁷

While obviously important for childhood development, the concept of *paideia* was also applied to adults – to involve oneself in *paideia* was seen as a very admirable and worthwhile luxury activity. Indeed, the meaning of this word would later be echoed by Johan Huizinga’s main thesis in *Homo Ludens*, where he argues that all forms of culture are ultimately predicated on play – a claim I examine in more detail in Chapter 8. Like Huizinga, D’Angour argues that, “The centrality of forms of play in Greek culture has seemed to offer a clue to its enduring intellectual and artistic accomplishments.”¹¹⁸

Among these personal accomplishments were the activities of *mousiké* — a term referring to the Muses and one that, for the Greeks, included poetry, literature, and drama as well as music and dancing. In the Republic (Book 4), Plato is suspicious of the apparent “lawlessness” of experimental *mousiké*, recognizing the influence such performances can have over the emotions of the audience. [This and all subsequent translations from the Greek are D’Angour’s.]

¹¹⁶ D’Angour. p.295.

¹¹⁷ D’Angour. p.296.

¹¹⁸ D’Angour. p.296.

“Lawlessness of this kind can easily go unnoticed... because it’s seen as a kind of play that does no harm. [But] it sinks bit by bit into peoples’ actions and character; it then looms up and infects their business dealings, and goes on to treat legal and social norms with wanton disregard, until it finally creates total havoc in both the private and public sphere.”¹¹⁹

These musical “laws” to which Plato alludes may have included, as an example, the convention that texts ought to be set to music following the “natural” sound of the words. Plato concludes that an ideal state must control *mousiké* to such an extent that drama would need to be abolished outright. Thus, while Plato does acknowledge the dual aspect of the Muse as patron of both *paidia* (play) and *paideia* (education), he nonetheless worries that the moral risk outweighs the possible benefits of free artistic expression:

In a city where the laws relating to the educational and playful aspects of the Muse are properly set down for the present and future, surely dramatists should not have a free hand in choruses to put any kind of rhythms, tunes, and words in front of the children of lawabiding citizens without considering their moral effect.¹²⁰

Plato says that play is dangerous because it encourages new, destabilizing ideas – it is worth noting that this very aspect of the play concept is what the artist-metaphysicians will later champion as a positive, affirmative element of play. For Plato, however, it is simply a dangerous, antisocial risk. Plato writes a diatribe about the dangers of experimental play destabilizing society:

No society has ever really noticed how important play is for social stability. My proposal is that one should regulate children’s play. Let them always play the same games, with the same rules and under the same conditions, and have fun playing with the same toys. That way you’ll find that adult behavior and society itself will be stable. As it is, games are always being changed and modified and new ones invented, so that youngsters never want the same thing two days running. They’ve no fixed standard of good or bad behavior, or of dress. They fasten on to anyone who comes up with some novelty or produces something with different shapes, colors, or whatever. This poses a threat to social stability, because people who promote this kind of innovation for children are insidiously

¹¹⁹ D’Angour. p.299.

¹²⁰ D’Angour. p.299.

changing the character of the young by making them reject the old and value the new. To promote such expressions and attitudes is a potential disaster for society... People suppose that chopping and changing children's play is just "playing," with no real or serious consequences. So instead of preventing children doing this, they give them their blessing. They don't realize that if children introduce novelties into their games, they'll end up as adults who are quite different from the previous generation, looking for a different way of life—which means new laws and new social institutions and, as I said earlier, disastrous consequences for society as a whole.¹²¹

Thus, Plato comes to the conclusion that an ideal state would carefully control the kinds of games children play and the kinds of art they are exposed to in an effort to preemptively instill within them the values and traditions of the state.

According to sociologist Alvin Gouldner's *Enter Plato* (1965), the above quote from Plato marks "the earliest recorded instance of such a connection being made [between regulating children's play and preventing social disorder]."¹²² Ultimately, Plato was suspicious of play because he recognized that there was an element of irrationality to its rules and rituals, but he also recognized its potential value in molding young people into rational, stable citizens of the city. Despite his suspicions,

both the fact that his dialogues also show a constant awareness of Socrates's playfulness with irony and verbal banter and his own assertion that philosophy is the 'truest music' (*mousiké*) carry the clear implication that both *paidia* (play) and *paideia* (education) have a place in the pursuit of wisdom.¹²³

Aristotle also weighed in on the topic of play, albeit briefly. One key difference between Plato's view of play and Aristotle's is that Aristotle keenly separated education and play, arguing that education is a fine way to spend one's leisure time while play is little more than taking a break from work. He writes:

We should ask what activity real leisure consists of. It's certainly not playing. That would mean play was the be-all and end-all of life, which is out of the

¹²¹ D'Angour. p.299-300.

¹²² D'Angour. p.300.

¹²³ D'Angour. p.306-307.

question. The fact is that play relates to work more than to leisure: the worker needs a break, and play is about taking a break from work, while leisure is the antithesis of work and exertion.¹²⁴

This dichotomy of unserious play and serious work will remain the standard understanding of play for centuries to come.

4.3 The Play Concept in the Middle Ages – Thomas Aquinas

Play almost disappears from philosophical discourse for many centuries after Plato and Aristotle. Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks about human play in a minor way, in the *Summa Theologica* II-II Q168. This is a quote that is representative of the medieval view of play:

Now just as weariness of the body is dispelled by resting the body, so weariness of the soul must needs be remedied by resting the soul: and the soul's rest is pleasure, as stated above. Consequently, the remedy for weariness of soul must needs consist in the application of some pleasure, by slackening the tension of the reason's study. Thus in the *Conferences of the Fathers* xxiv, 21, it is related of Blessed John the Evangelist, that when some people were scandalized on finding him playing together with his disciples, he is said to have told one of them who carried a bow to shoot an arrow. And when the latter had done this several times, he asked him whether he could do it indefinitely, and the man answered that if he continued doing it, the bow would break. Whence the Blessed John drew the inference that in like manner man's mind would break if its tension were never relaxed.¹²⁵

Aquinas states that “play is necessary for the intercourse of human life” and that “The Philosopher [Aristotle] reckons that the lack of mirth is a vice,” yet warns that it can go against reason to play in excess and “whatever is against reason is a sin.”

Now a man who is without mirth, not only is lacking in playful speech, but is also burdensome to others, since he is deaf to the moderate mirth of others. Consequently they are vicious, and are said to be boorish or rude, as the Philosopher states (*Ethic.* iv, 8). Since, however, mirth is useful for the sake of the rest and pleasures it affords; and since, in human life, pleasure and rest are not in quest for their own sake, but for the sake of operation, as stated in *Ethic.* x, 6, it follows that [quoting Aristotle]

¹²⁴ D'Angour. p.301.

¹²⁵ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica* II-II Q168 Article 2. “Whether there can be a virtue about games?” 1485. Cited from <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3168.htm> 10/13/2021.

“lack of mirth is less sinful than excess thereof.” Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. ix, 10): “We should make few friends for the sake of pleasure, since but little sweetness suffices to season life, just as little salt suffices for our meat.”¹²⁶

As we can see, the Platonic and Aristotelian understanding of human play is still dominant in Aquinas’s era, the 13th century.

4.4 The Play Concept in the Age of Reason – Immanuel Kant

As we enter the Age of Reason in the 18th century, we find that Immanuel Kant uses the play concept sparingly, following in the Platonic/Aristotelian tradition, but he does address it in a few key places. The sublime experience of the awesome power of natural forces, for example, is a result of the “free play” between the faculties of the imagination and reason. But this is not really a comment on play itself – Kant is merely using the concept to describe the rapid, semi-random interactions of these two mental faculties. In fact, the other place Kant draws upon the concept of play is to announce that the explicit goal of the first *Critique* is to replace the “mere play” (*blosses Spiel*) of the imagination with the seriousness of scientific investigation; according to Kant, philosophy has indulged in “mere play” all too often and he seeks to change that.¹²⁷ Thus, Kant largely dismisses play as a mere trifling, the opposite of hard, honest work, as Aristotle did long ago. Kant does recognize that play has the ability to generate “high cultural values” as a militaristic, agonistic social force, but because play is largely nonserious and unproductive, Kant, like Plato, worries that unchecked and unbridled play will lead to passion and intellectual disorder. Spariosu explains Kant’s position,

Even such apparently harmless pursuits as daydreaming and poetry may lead to a “delusion of the senses,” to mental weakness, and eventually to madness. (47-52).

¹²⁶ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica* II-II Q168 Article 4. “Whether there is a sin in lack of mirth?” 1485. Cited from <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3168.htm> 10/13/2021.

¹²⁷ Spariosu, Mihai I. *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY. 1989. p.34.

The reading of novels, for example, “in addition to causing many other mental disorders... makes distraction habitual.” In a distracted state, we blindly follow the free play of our imagination,” instead of “checking it by reason,” and thus become “useless for society” (47).¹²⁸

But Kant also recognizes play’s role in feeding the imagination and understanding; play is utilized in the creation of fine art, which can ultimately serve reason, so Kant does see some value in play. As Huizinga will argue two centuries later, Kant understands that play – especially in its agonistic, militaristic form – leads to the generation of high cultural values, which serve to culminate the beauty of nature in the form of human activity.¹²⁹ In this way, Kant sees a place for play in his philosophical system, though in a strictly controlled and curated way – play is permissible so long as it remains subordinate to Reason.

4.5 The Play Concept as the Drive towards Enlightenment – Friedrich Schiller

One of Kant’s contemporaries, Friedrich Schiller, produced a philosophical system that, while still in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, places the play concept in a more important role and in a more positive light than Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, or Kant. On Schiller’s use of the play concept, Spariosu writes,

In Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen (1795), Schiller sets out, under the immediate impact of Kant – and that of the French revolution – to investigate the relationship between the moral and aesthetic realms, or between education and fine art, with a view to establishing the conditions of the possibility of what he calls the ‘aesthetic State...’ Schiller’s project can, then, be described as Platonic in intent and Kantian in method. Its most important result, from our point of view, is the firm reestablishment of play as a legitimate topic of serious philosophical discourse, thereby bringing about a revolution in the modern history of the play concept(s)... Schiller’s return to play as a useful philosophical concept occurs in relation to Plato, who, after purging it of irrationality and violence, acknowledges it as the ‘noblest’ activity of Reason.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Sapirosu. p.51.

¹²⁹ Spariosu. p.44.

¹³⁰ Sapirosu. p.53-54.

Human nature, Schiller argues, can be understood as the interplay between two fundamental drives that govern our behavior: what he calls the *Stofftrieb* or “sense-drive” and the *Formtrieb* or “form-drive.” The sense-drive comes from humankind’s sensuous, physical existence and requires that “there shall be change, that time shall have a content.” Humanity’s finite being – our phenomenal aspect – is ruled by the sense-drive. The form-drive, on the other hand, proceeds from our rational nature and is “intent on giving [us] freedom to bring harmony into the diversity of [our] manifestations, and to affirm [our] Person among all [our] changes of Condition.” The form-drive annuls time and change and wants the “real to be necessary and eternal, and the eternal and the necessary to be real.” While the sense-drive governs individual cases, the form-drive gives laws.¹³¹

Play enters the picture when both drives are directed to work in concert, rather than opposing one another agonistically, which is their typical state. Schiller warns against subordinating the sensuous drive to the rational drive, as many 18th century thinkers propose, including Kant. Instead, Schiller suggests that a more reciprocal relation between the two drives can give rise to a transcendental third drive – the *Spieltrieb* or “play-drive.” If humanity learns to feel themselves as matter and know themselves as mind, the sense-drive and the form-drive could work in tandem and direct the play-drive to annul “time *within time*, reconciling becoming [sense-drive] with absolute being [form-drive] and change [sense-drive] with identity [form-drive] (XIV, 3).”¹³² The play-drive functions as a fiction Reason uses to mediate between itself and experience. As Spariosu points out, the play-drive functions in Schiller in the same middle position that the aesthetic judgement does in Kant, and for the same reason:

...while [the play-drive] it is itself devoid of any cognitive value, it nevertheless helps Reason mediate between the realm of the concept of nature and that of the

¹³¹ Spariosu. p.54-55.

¹³² Spariosu. p.55.

concept of freedom. But whereas in Kant these two realms ultimately remain heterogeneous, in Schiller they may become reconciled in the *as if* modality of the aesthetic State demanded by the play-drive.¹³³

In the *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller presents his vision for an ideal State (both as a standard against which historical States should be judged and as a moral imperative for future generations towards building a utopia) through his analysis of the play-drive. Schiller maintains that historical States have proven inadequate precisely because they do not reconcile the sense-drive and moral-drive in a harmonious way – that is, they do not balance their sensuous and rational drives and thus fail to develop a play-drive. The *Naturstaat* (natural State) leans too heavily on the sense-drive while the *Moralischestraat* (moral State) relies too much on Reason and the form-drive. The sweet spot in between is the foundation for Schiller’s ideal State, which embraces the play-drive in a moral and aesthetic sense. Schiller asks “But what is meant by a ‘mere play’ [*blosses Spiel*], when we know that in all conditions of humanity that very thing is play, and only that is play which makes man complete and develops simultaneously his twofold nature?”¹³⁴ Schiller pushes this point hard, even going so far as to declare that a human being is at their most human when they are at play. “For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays.”¹³⁵

By placing play at the center of his philosophical framework, Schiller opens the door for future thinkers to give play serious consideration. However, although he moves away from several of Kant’s dichotomies concerning play, Schiller never quite breaks free of them completely. For example, he writes that there is a material play-drive (which he, in Kantian fashion, calls “mere play”) and there is the aesthetic, transcendental play-drive (which is an

¹³³ Sapirosu. p.55-56.

¹³⁴ Schiller, J. C. Friedrich Von. *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man*. Letter XV. 1794. Accessed on Fordham University. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/schiller-education.asp> Retrieved 108/219/2021.

¹³⁵ Schiller. Letter XV.

instrument towards unfettering Reason).¹³⁶ He dismisses the former and advocates only the latter. Still, Schiller is the first modern thinker to call rational heuristic procedures “play,” a picture of the human mind that will go on to strongly influence many Anglo-American and Continental scholars, Neo-Kantians like F.A. Lange and Hans Vaihinger, and the Romantic idealists’ revival of play as a model of virtuous aesthetic activity.¹³⁷

In the wake of Kant, Schiller instates what Sapirosu calls “a *metaphysica ludens* in close relation to a Romantic idealist aesthetics which, like its Neoclassical counterpart, continues to subordinate art and play to Reason.” Although he breaks from Kant by placing play at the center of humankind’s transcendental awakening, Schiller’s aesthetics still ultimately champion Reason. He therefore stands in direct opposition to a literary practice in both Germany and England that celebrates play’s ‘irrational’ aspect. Many anti-idealist and antimetaphysical thinkers draw from this irrational literary tradition, including Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who will turn classic aesthetic theories upside down, subordinating Reason to art and play instead. “With Schopenhauer and his heirs, one can speak of a second aesthetic turn in modern philosophy, in which the orderly and telos-bound play of Reason is replaced by the arbitrary and violent play of physical forces, or the unmediated play of power.”¹³⁸ This philosophy of power (or *Machtphilosophie*) will come to dominate the philosophical discourse on the play concept in Europe from the 18th century onwards to the present day.

¹³⁶ Sapirosu. p.60.

¹³⁷ Sapirosu. p.65.

¹³⁸ Sapirosu. p.65-66.

4.6 The Play Concept as the Will to Power – Friedrich Nietzsche

Following in the footsteps of his mentor Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche attempts to go beyond his teacher by turning Schopenhauer's pessimism on its head and finding ways to affirm life in the face of nihilism. For many of his foundational thoughts, Nietzsche turns to the Presocratics of Ancient Greece. His view on play is strongly influenced by thinkers like Heraclitus. Unlike Kant and Schiller, Nietzsche will conceive personal human play as being not entirely different from prerational cosmic play – a version of the same “exuberant and violent movement, beyond good and evil, which engenders and destroys entire worlds.”¹³⁹ Even Nietzsche's writing style – “oracular, gnomic, and dithyrambic” – bears a strong family resemblance to the Presocratic style seen in Heraclitus.¹⁴⁰ Because Nietzsche holds an aesthetic view of the world¹⁴¹ and places play in the center of his philosophical thought, Spariosu dubs him the first modern “artist-metaphysician,” a title that can be applied to many of the thinkers who follow in Nietzsche's wake.

Like Schiller, Nietzsche sees play as a vitally important part of his philosophical system. Play features in nearly all of his most important philosophical concepts: in his aesthetic view of the world, the Will to Power is a manifestation of play, the play of impersonal forces; the Übermensch must be able to play like a child; and, through passion and art, play offers the key to escaping the crushing nihilism brought about by the death of God. Nietzsche thought very highly

¹³⁹ Spariosu. p.67.

¹⁴⁰ Spariosu, p.68-69.

¹⁴¹ While Nietzsche certainly presents a theory of art in *The Birth of Tragedy*, his later works feature a different kind of aesthetics. Rather than artworks, his focus shifts to the aesthetics of character and virtue. Thus, when I refer to Nietzsche's aesthetics, I am mainly referring to his notion of living one's life like a work of art, with a style and intentionality of character. For later Nietzsche, the well-lived life has an aesthetic value. Thus, it could be argued that the title “artist-metaphysician” is inappropriate, given his view on metaphysics and his later move away from artworks as such. But this is the title Spariosu uses and it is appropriate for those who follow Nietzsche (like Heidegger and Gadamer), so I will continue to apply it to Nietzsche in this dissertation, as he certainly belongs at the head of this group.

of play as an indicator of greatness, writing in the semi-autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, “I do not know of any other way of associating with great tasks than *play*: as a sign of greatness, this is an essential presupposition.”¹⁴²

As a scholar of Ancient Greece, Nietzsche felt that the greatness of the Hellenics came from their contests, including war, which he rightly associated with the play concept. While Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Schiller were all concerned that irrational play was destructive and dangerous for the emotions it can stir, this is precisely what Nietzsche argues made Hellenic culture so special. As soon as play (the *agôn* of contest) faded out of fashion, Athens and then Sparta fell to self-destructive chaos. “The fall of Athens and then Sparta proves, paradoxically, that ‘without envy, jealousy, and contesting ambition the Hellenic State like the Hellenic man degenerates.’ Once these states give up ‘the noblest Hellenic fundamental thought, the contest,’ they betray Hellenism as a whole.”¹⁴³

Another insight that links Nietzsche back to Heraclitus is both thinkers’ aesthetic worldview. Both men saw the cosmos as a divine game, played by the ever-burning flame or by Zeus, on the analogy of the innocent play of an artist or a child. As a comment on the famous fragment 52 (Diels-Kranz), which states that “Time is a child playing draughts, the kingly power is a child’s,” Nietzsche writes,

In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away [*Werden und Vergehen*], structuring and destroying, without any moral additive [*moralische Zurechnung*], in forever equal innocence [*in ewig gleicher Unschuld*]. And as children and artists play, so plays the ever-living fire. It constructs and destroys, all in innocence. Such is the game that the aeon plays with itself. Transforming itself into water and earth, it builds towers of sand like a child at the sea-shore, piles them up and tramples them down... Not hybris but the ever self-renewing impulse to play calls new worlds into being. The

¹⁴² Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. transl. and ed. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann. Modern Library. New York, NY. 1992. p.714.

¹⁴³ Spariosu. p.73-74.

child throws its toys away from time to time – and starts again in innocent caprice.¹⁴⁴

In this way, Nietzsche unites animal play and cosmic play as being two sides of the same coin – a stark contrast to Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Schiller, who all tried to distinguish between the play of man (subordinated to Reason) and the play of the universe (the play of God). Indeed, the “aesthetic” perspective that Nietzsche has in mind in this passage is precisely the opposite of Kant’s and Schiller’s, which concerned Being and Reason. Nietzsche’s perspective concerns Becoming and the sensible world, granting priority to the imagination and the senses over reason and the understanding.¹⁴⁵

Nietzsche returns to this prerational view of play when he speaks of Anaxagoras’s notion of *nous* as the random cosmic creative force... “*Nous* has no duty and hence no purpose or goal which it would be forced to pursue. Having once started with a motion, and thus having set itself a goal, it would be...” To complete this sentence is difficult. Heraclitus did; he said “... a game.”¹⁴⁶

Play as divine creation and destruction features again in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Nietzsche writes,

The child is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes.
Yes, a sacred Yes is needed, my brothers, for the sport of creation: the spirit now wills *its own* will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins *its own* world.¹⁴⁷

We can see in this passage Nietzsche comparing to the innocence of a child at play is extended to the divine play of forces in the (tragic) world – both aspects of play are autotelic and innocent, and it is these features that the Übermensch will personify when they create their own values. Spariosu recognizes Nietzsche move towards the Presocratics here,

¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. Transl. Marianne Cowan. Gateway Editions; Reprint edition. Washington D.C. 1996. p.62.

¹⁴⁵ Spariosu. p.75.

¹⁴⁶ Spariosu. p.75.

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Penguin Books. New York, NY. 2003. p.55.

And this child is the child not of Christ, but of Heraclitus. It is the *aion*, or innocent power as eternity, beginning its game of creation and destruction each time anew, without remorse, in blissful self-forgetfulness. The Overman, then, shares the ambivalent features of the “child” Dionysus, who embodies the heroic world of tragedy, showing the “double nature of a cruel, savage daemon and a mild, gentle, ruler.”¹⁴⁸

Besides the world of tragedy and the *Übermensch*, play also relates significantly to the Will to Power, which is, like play, difficult to define. Play is a “manifestation of power just as power is a manifestation of play, and here both terms should be understood in their archaic sense, as ‘Dionysian,’ ecstatic and violent play of physical Becoming, as aristocratic agon, and as chance-necessity.”¹⁴⁹

In this way, play (especially *prerational* play) features heavily in Nietzsche’s grounding philosophical premises; it is something he inherits and from the Presocratics from whom he draws much inspiration. In his analysis of the genealogy of values, it is the archaic values of Heraclitus and his contemporaries that offer Nietzsche examples of alternatives to the Platonic Christian values he despises. By reintroducing these values – which feature aesthetic worldviews and concern Becoming, rather than Being – to Western philosophical discourse, Nietzsche creates the conditions for the postmodern *episteme* that will come to dominate Continental philosophy in the 20th century.

Clearly, Nietzsche breaks from Kant and Schiller on the subject of play. His aestheticism is based on the archaic, prerational kind of play that Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas all worried over – a worry that Kant and Schiller both inherit. The rational, rule-determined, orderly, and predictable manifestation of Being kept cosmic play and animal play quite separated; when Nietzsche instead gives priority to the violent, exuberant, and arbitrary movement of Becoming,

¹⁴⁸ Spariosu. p.88.

¹⁴⁹ Spariosu. p.91.

the line between cosmic play and animal play is blurred. Rather than subordinating play to Reason as a social stabilizer, Nietzsche instead has high regard for new art and new aesthetic ideas, since he believes these hold the key to overcoming nihilism in the face of the death of God. Where Plato and Kant subordinate play to Reason, Nietzsche is suspicious of Reason and instead places play (especially innocent, childlike play) in the dominant position. This move from a Reason-focused, moral worldview to an aesthetic one will inspire Continental thinkers who follow in Nietzsche's wake, including German phenomenologists Heidegger, Fink, and Gadamer and French post-structuralists Deleuze and Derrida, all of whom refer to Nietzsche and echo his value-making priorities.

4.7 The Play Concept as the Play of Being – Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger is one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century and his use of the play concept draws strongly from Nietzsche. For Heidegger, the play of Being is also a play of Becoming – the play of the world is a play of physical forces in which man is both player and plaything.¹⁵⁰ He argues that Nietzsche, like his mentor Schopenhauer, is still trapped in a subjectivist and metaphysical interpretation of the Will (to Power), and he wants to go beyond that. Thus, while Heidegger, like Nietzsche, conceives of the world as power play and places great import on the play of art, especially poetry, he argues that Nietzsche is still stuck in a metaphysics he inherits from the Greeks and it is Heidegger who will finally push past that.

In the thirteenth and final lecture of *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (*The Principle of Ground*), Heidegger speaks specifically about the essence of play. Spairosu summarizes Heidegger's take on play in this lecture,

¹⁵⁰ Spairosu. p.67-68.

According to [Heidegger], play has always been interpreted metaphysically as a mere being and, as such, it has always been assigned some kind of “reason.” Hence play as being has always been seen from the perspective of Ground (*Grund*) or *ratio*, as a dialectic of necessity of freedom, as a rule-determined, calculative activity (p. 186). In this sense, Leibniz’s statement, *Cum Deus calculat fit mundus*, normally translated as “when God reckons/calculates, the world comes into being,” would more appropriately be rendered as “while God plays, the world comes into being” (*während Gott spielt, wird Welt*). The question for Heidegger, however, is no longer to define the being of play, but the play of Being, and he performs another leap into a new key when he asks: “Does the essence of play allow itself to be properly defined in terms of Being as Ground, or must we think Being and Ground out of the essence of play? [*Lässt sich das Wesen des Spiels sachgemäss vom Sein als Grund her bestimmen, oder musen wir Sein und Grund aus dem Wesen des Spiels denken?*]” Choosing the second path, Heidegger defines Being itself as play, or as an interplay of Ground and Groundlessness, of sending forth and withdrawal, which cannot be ‘rationalized’ or thought of in terms of any particular being. The play of Being, like the rose, has no ‘why.’ It remains purposeless, an inscrutable mystery.¹⁵¹

Thus, Heidegger defines Being as play, groundless and enigmatic, but also ubiquitous and full of creative power. By transferring power from beings to Being itself, he begins his journey to overcoming the metaphysics of the subject (which he still sees in Nietzsche’s Will to Power) and thus brings “Nietzsche’s accomplishment to a full unfolding.”

Heidegger retains the power-oriented mentality and high regard for art that Nietzsche’s concept of play carries, and consolidates Nietzsche’s return to the archaic, prerational concept of power as *Weltspiel*, but Heidegger also breaks from Nietzsche in a significant way. Unlike Nietzsche, for whom play served as a psychological and historical explanation, Heidegger uses the play concept as a metaphysical, grounding of Being that is itself groundless.¹⁵²

Being is not a sober, rational process for Heidegger. Nor can thinking be sober logic. Being is play; thinking is playing: intimating, symbolizing poetizing, associating, hinting, revealing, concealing. Play is not only what Heidegger means by Being; it is also the way we must speak about it. Being, outside the ordinary sphere of things (beings), is an extra-ordinary play. Thinking, outside the serious

¹⁵¹ Spariosu. p.119-120.

¹⁵² Spariosu. p.124.

occupation of considering the connections between things, is an extra-ordinary attempt to play along with Being.¹⁵³

In Heidegger's later philosophy, he describes Being as mission (*Geschick*) and Being as the world or the foursome (*das Geviert*). Heidegger understands both mission and world in terms of the groundless “play” (*Spiel*) of Being, with the former oriented temporally (*Zeit*) and the latter spatially (*Raum*). Mission and world belong together in the event of Being and constitute the “space of play of time” (*Zeit-Spiel-Raum*).

Being plays the game of a child; Heidegger agrees with Nietzsche in finding Heraclitus in fragment 52 to be extremely important in this conception. Being plays because it plays, without “why.” It is impossible to explain the movements of Being with a causal pattern; Being does not produce an effect on anything else and no effect is produced upon it by anything else. Being fluctuates and wavers in a dance, not a rigid causal chain of events. Thus, Heidegger is sharply at odds with the Reason-focused schemata of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, and Schiller, and he uses play to describe that prerational worldview because it is innocent, autotelic, and creative. Two of Heidegger’s followers – Eugene Fink and Hans-Gerog Gadamer – will both attach great importance to play in their own phenomenological projects.

4.8 The Play Concept after Nietzsche and Heidegger

The influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger has, by the mid-20th century, moved the play concept into a key position in the philosophical discourse of Europe. The play concept – which was the negative condition of the possibility of metaphysical discourse in Kant and the *als ob* activity of reason in Schiller – returns to its archaic roots as the violent and innocent

¹⁵³ Caputo, J.D. “Being, ground and play in Heidegger.” *Man and World* 3, 26–48. 1970.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01596538>

manifestation of power after Nietzsche and Heidegger.¹⁵⁴ Spariosu calls Nietzsche, Heidegger, and those they influenced “artist-metaphysicians,” who give prerational cosmic play priority over rational human play.

[We can] trace this agon in the work of some of the most influential contemporary thinkers, who can be called ‘artist-metaphysicians’ both because, like Nietzsche and Heidegger, they turn to art and play in order to grapple with the consequences of a ‘nihilistic,’ self-devouring mode of thought, and because, again like Nietzsche and Heidegger, they in effect use art, aesthetics, and play to safeguard for philosophy the cultural authority that it has stood in danger of losing for the past one hundred years... These thinkers... are Eugen Fink and Hans-Gerog Gadamer in Germany and Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida in France.¹⁵⁵

These four philosophers (Fink, Gadamer, Derrida, and Deleuze) share many key similarities.

Like Heidegger, who was influenced in this regard by Nietzsche, these thinkers see the world as a work of art that incessantly destroys and recreates itself. The artist-metaphysicians all recognize the importance of play as power in Nietzsche and Heidegger and they have all written on Nietzsche or Heidegger – often on both, and some are book-length studies. They all write playfully, each with a virtuosity that is stylized and at times purposively provocative. These four philosophers will, oftentimes, not unlike Nietzsche and Heidegger, “gleefully and daringly leap and dance on the borderline between logic and poetic thought, between philosophy and literature.”¹⁵⁶

4.9 The Worldliness of the Play Concept – Eugen Fink

Eugen Fink was a student of and collaborator with Edmund Husserl in the 1920s and 1930s, and was a follower and lifelong friend of Heidegger in the circle of phenomenologists that dominated the philosophical discourse in Germany during the 1940s and 1950s. While his work

¹⁵⁴ Spariosu. p.124.

¹⁵⁵ Spariosu. p.125.

¹⁵⁶ Spariosu. p.125.

is less well-known, partly because few of his works have been translated into English, *Play as Symbol of the World* (*Spiel als Weltsymbol*) is considered by many to be his most important work and its English translation by Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner has increased Fink's importance in the English-speaking philosophical discourse. Like Heidegger (and Nietzsche before him), Fink draws inspiration from Heraclitus's fragment 52. Fink attempts to describe his philosophical project in terms of the three concepts in the book's title: play, symbol, and world. He understands "play" as a "non-actual," imaginary state of existence which is enacted on the foundation of the lived, actual world. Play is a world-bestowal that is at once mimetic, yet also freely-chosen. Fink uses the Husserlian label "irreal" to describe play's ontological status, thus indicating its phenomenological quality of fostering a non-actual disclosure of meaning.¹⁵⁷ Fink uses the term "world" in its Heideggerian sense – the underlying location within which the human agent encounters phenomena. In this understanding of "world," it contextualizes and individualizes. Fink goes on to explain what the world is not: world is not the sum total of all beings, nor is it the receptacle where all things reside. World disappears when we try to grasp it; it is both meaningless and groundless in and of itself.

Unreality is indeed appearance, but in the sense of 'shining forth' (*Erscheinung*). Human play is an intertwining of reality and appearance through which the world-totality shine forth on a limited stage. In the case of play, one can no longer speak of copies, because appearances do not imitate or reproduce anything; rather, they stand in a symbolical, and not a representational, relation to Being, which flashes through fragmentarily, in the manner of broken mirror pieces.¹⁵⁸

When Fink says that "play is a symbol for the world," he means that there is an illustrative relationship between the structure of play and the world as we encounter it. Through play, with its irreal, groundless purposelessness, the world-open character of human existence begins to be

¹⁵⁷ Fink, Eugen. *Play as Symbol of the World*. Transl. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, IN. 2016. p.95-96.

¹⁵⁸ Spariosu. p.129.

revealed. Fink suggests that we play precisely because we are open to world and are existentially co-constituted along with it. Everyone finds the hypnotic character of play attractive because, through play, we are able to independently enact the ontological character of world ourselves.

While Fink ultimately concludes that describing play as a symbol of world is insufficient, he does illuminate several important aspects of play and world along the way. Spariosu explains,

We have seen that in Heidegger Being needs Dasein for its hide-and-seek game, and therefore Dasein appears as a privileged sort of being vis-à-vis all other beings. In principle, Fink does not deny Dasein's special place in the history of Being; nevertheless he asks such questions as: What is Dasein's relation to the totality of beings? What is the relation of the World to all that emerges into presence within it, including Dasein? Does the World "world" without man's participation or does emergence into presence occur only in the nearness of human consciousness? By way of answering these questions, Fink proposes a 'cosmological' interpretation of the world which undoubtedly is already implicit in Heidegger's thought, but which clearly spells out Dasein's dual role of player (*Mitspieler*) and toy (*Spielzeug*) in the play of the world. He further develops Heidegger's notion of *Weltspiel*, by describing the 'world-totality' (*Weltall*) – Fink's own, nonmystical, version of Heidegger's 'Region' (*die Gegund*) – in terms of a 'play without player(s)' (*ein Spiel ohne Spieler*)."¹⁵⁹

Whereas the play concept in Nietzsche and Heidegger remains groundless while it grounds their thought, with Fink we see this very groundlessness used to get at the worldliness of the world – namely, the relation between all beings and the world (rather than the relation between beings themselves). Fink writes,

Precisely as a human problem, human play is worldly – and as a worldly problem it points to the human being. The relationship between the human being and world cannot be adequately thought on the model of the relation between two things, two beings.¹⁶⁰

Instead, Fink sees the relation between the human being and the world-totality as fundamentally different than the intraworldly relations between Dasein and other beings. This human-to-world relation is expressed in play because play involves the unreal, the realm of appearance.

¹⁵⁹ Spariosu. p.125-126.

¹⁶⁰ Fink. p.46.

This is partly so because all other human phenomena imply a distinction between reality and unreality (appearance), whereas play implies an interlacing of the two. In human play an ‘unreal sphere of meaning breaks into the total reality [Gesamtwirklichkeit] of actual things and processes, a sphere which is here and yet not here, present and yet not present.’ (p. 229). The word ‘unreal’ points to the fact that the play world transcends the causal chain of phenomena or ordinary reality, overflowing into the realm of appearance. In turn, appearance must not be understood in the Platonic sense of a lesser power of being, of something superficial that is the result of a false perception. On the contrary, ‘appearance’ describes the way in which world-totality may manifest itself within the world, in the play of Dasein (pp. 230-231).¹⁶¹

Thus, play expresses its essential relation to the world through play’s unreality. The human being (a player) imitates the world-totality *as if* he or she were omnipotent, containing within him- or herself all possibilities, transcending them. It is in this sense that Fink argues that the cosmic human-to-world relation can be understood as a symbol of the world.

But this symbol is imperfect. While he maintains that human play shares certain features with the play of the world, Fink ultimately finds that “the world reflects itself only in the unreality component of human play and therefore can be perceived only in a broken and fragmentary fashion.” Furthermore, the play of the world is play without a player – “it is the play of individuation, containing within itself all individual things, beings, and phenomena, including men and gods.”¹⁶² Thus, Fink concludes that, although personal human play does point towards the human-world relation in key ways, it cannot be a true world symbol in the fullest sense.

4.10 The Play Concept in Ontological Hermeneutics – Hans-Georg Gadamer

While Fink’s use of the play concept can be seen as a return to Nietzsche’s *Machtphilosophie* via Heidegger, the play concept for Gadamer – another disciple of Heidegger

¹⁶¹ Spariosu. p.131.

¹⁶² Spariosu. p.132.

– can be understood as a return to Kant, Schiller, and Hegel.¹⁶³ In his influential 1960 book *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that objectivity is not unachievable, as Romantic hermeneuticists like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey have suggested. Gadamer argues that objective meaning is in fact created through intersubjective communication, and he deploys the play concept as an explanation of how that process is structured. In this sense he can be understood as developing the philosophical hermeneutics of his teacher, Heidegger. Methodical contemplation is directly opposed to reflection and experience – only by mastering our experience can we reach the truth. This can be difficult because our understanding is always changing and indicating new perspectives, and “Being alien to a tradition is a condition of our understanding.” We can never truly step outside our tradition – a concept known as the hermeneutic circle – so the task left to us is to try to understand it.¹⁶⁴

Play is a key ontological clue (*Leitfaden*) tool to unlocking that understanding by serving as “both as a metaphor for describing the way in which the truth of Being occurs through man’s hermeneutical activity and as the groundless grounding of Gadamer’s own thought.”¹⁶⁵ Following Heidegger, Gadamer utilizes the play concept to understand the mode of being of a work of art. Humans cannot arrive at the truth of Being through an objective and rigorous scientific procedure, but rather the truth of Being is something that happens or advents (*ereignet*) to them.¹⁶⁶ Like art, play involves an experience that transforms the one experiencing it and does not occur for their sake but rather manifests itself (*kommt zur Darstellung*) through them.

Reinterpreting certain Neo-Kantian elements in Buytendijk’s and Huizinga’s phenomenological definitions of play, Gadamer proceeds to show that the essence of play is independent of the players, consisting of a to-and-fro movement without any goal except in and for itself. Play, then, is a *natural* process and in this sense

¹⁶³ Spariosu. p.133.

¹⁶⁴ Wikipedia.org. “Hermeneutics.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutics>. Retrieved 10/13/2021.

¹⁶⁵ Spariosu. p.133.

¹⁶⁶ Spariosu. p.133-134.

the metaphorical and the literal meanings of the word are indistinguishable: water, light, animals, and men ‘play’ because they are all part of nature. In turn, nature, ‘inasmuch as it is without purpose or intention, as it is, without exertion, a constantly self-renewing play, can appear as a model for art’ (p. 94).¹⁶⁷

Gadamer immediately seizes upon the essence of play – a to-and-fro movement without any goal except in and for itself – and recognizes that it mimics in many ways the way we come to understand something new.

First of all, Gadamer notes that, as in play, the attitude of the players is not what determines the nature of the play; rather, it is the nature of the play that determines the attitudes of the players. The play draws us in and takes us over. “It is the game itself that plays, insofar as it draws the players into itself and thus itself becomes the actual subjectum of the play movement [*Spielbewegung*].”¹⁶⁸

Even the rules of the game are determined not by the players but by the nature of the play itself. In various games, the to-and-fro movement which is the essence of play is variously structured, and to follow the rules of a game means to follow its particular movement. Thus, in its essence, for Gadamer, as for Heidegger and Fink, all playing is a being-played (*alles Spielen ist ein Gespieltwerden*, p. 95).¹⁶⁹

We participate in the event that unfolds; the idea that players control the game is an illusion – it is the soccer ball that determines the actions of the players on the field. So it is with an artwork – it sets the parameters and draws us in, and in so doing, it has the power to transform us.

Just as Gadamer uses the mode of being of play to understand the mode of being of the artwork, he uses the mode of being of the artwork to understand the mode of being of language. The play metaphor is taken up in order to clarify what Gadamer means when he writes about the event-advent of the truth of Being as language and its relation to understanding.

¹⁶⁷ Spariosu. p.135.

¹⁶⁸ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Bloomsbury Academic, Reprint Edition. 2013. Originally published in 1960. p.446.

¹⁶⁹ Spariosu. p.135-136.

Like the work of art and like play, language does not have a ‘being-in-itself which is different from its reproduction or the contingency of its appearance’ (p. 432); rather it is a unity of appearance and essence, interpretation and understanding, tradition and individual subjectivity past and present.

We do not reach truth in language, but truth reaches us, just as we do not speak through language but the latter speaks through us... someone who understands is ‘always already drawn into an event through which meaning asserts itself’ (p. 446). We do not claim truth, but truth claims us, as we understand despite ourselves, as it were, in the same way that a player is drawn into the game and becomes one with its movement.¹⁷⁰

Here Spariosu emphasizes two main aspects in Gadamer’s concept of play: first, the emergence into presence or self-(re)presentation and second, the play as a “being-played.” Interestingly, Gadamer invokes the natural aspect of play as self-representation (*Selbstdarstellung*) and self-movement (*Selbstbewegung*) without goal or purpose, and reintroduces the concept of play as an excess of energy (*Uberschuss*) from Plato, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, who use it to underscore the prerational character of play. When it comes to defining art as play, however, Gadamer instead focuses on play’s orderly character. He writes in *Truth and Method* that “art is a higher form of play because it has a repeatable structure (*Gebilde*), which gives it ‘sameness’ (*Selbigkeit*) or identity and, consequently, renders it communicable.”¹⁷¹

Compared to Fink, who follows Nietzsche in viewing play primarily as a prerational manifestation of power, Gadamer instead stresses the rational element of play. Art as play is seen primarily as the orderly “transformation into structure of a chaotic, arbitrary, and purposeless natural movement.”¹⁷² Gadamer agrees with Fink in acknowledging the original link between play and art as mimesis, but unlike Fink Gadamer does not follow the Platonic tradition of severing mimesis-play (as a mere imitation) from knowledge and truth.¹⁷³ Gadamer holds that

¹⁷⁰ Spariosu. p.138-139.

¹⁷¹ Spariosu. p.139.

¹⁷² Spariosu. p.142.

¹⁷³ Spariosu. p.142-143.

Western thought does not go far enough, but he largely limits his exposition of play to a critique of Romantic subjectivist aesthetics – that is, the Cartesian division between subject and object.

Spariosu compares Gadamer's treatment of the play concept to his predecessors,

For Gadamer, as for Heidegger and Postmodernism in general, Romantic aesthetic subjectivism and Cartesian scientific objectivism are the chief villains in the drama of Western consciousness. In contrast to other artist-metaphysicians, however, Gadamer advocates a return to a holistic, prerational mode of thought without being prepared to accept the full consequences of such a return (that is, giving up the Platonic and Aristotelian rationalist tradition). On the one hand, he obscures the archaic link between play, art, and unmediated power, emphasizing the orderly, tradition-oriented character of human play. On the other hand, he operates with Heidegger's prerational notions of aesthetics and play, which view man as both player and plaything in the violent play of Being (a modern, Heideggerian version of the archaic play of Becoming).¹⁷⁴

Gadamer uses the play concept as a crucial ontological clue in his philosophical project, though he does not go as far as Fink in making it the centerpiece of his thought. Still, *Truth and Method* relies heavily on the phenomenological structure of play – its irreality – to elucidate several important points about the objectivity of artworks and their relation to truth. Uniquely among the artist-metaphysicians, Gadamer marks a return to the rational aspect of play – while Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Fink emphasize play's prerational character, Gadamer's take is, in some ways, closer to Kant's and Schiller's. Unlike Kant and Schiller, however, Gadamer subordinates reason to play, rather than the reverse, and so he remains closer to the German artist-metaphysicians than the rationalists of the 18th century or the Romantics they inspired.

4.11 The Play Concept as Chance-Necessity – Gilles Deleuze

The play concept finds purchase in the French thinkers of the 20th century via Nietzsche, but Deleuze and Derrida emphasize a different aspect of the play concept than the Germans of

¹⁷⁴ Spariosu. p.143.

that century. For the Germans of the 20th century, Nietzsche is antimetaphysical and antiscientistic; for Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche is primarily anti-Hegelian and antidialectical, and his treatment of the play concept must be understood in that context. Spariosu categorizes Deleuze's Nietzsche as,

...the genealogist of morals, introducing 'meaning' and 'value' into classical philosophy; he is the diagnostician of *ressentiment*, bad conscience, and nihilism versus the master-slave dialectic, unhappy consciousness, and alienation; finally, he is the transvaluator of all values through the affirmation of a will to power, understood as an interplay of active physical forces, rather than as a transcendental, voluntaristic, or subjectivist principle.¹⁷⁵

While Fink and Gadamer return to Nietzsche via Heidegger, Deleuze draws from Nietzsche directly and so his concept of play does not operate in terms of the ontological difference. Nonetheless, Deleuze joins Heidegger, Fink, and to a certain extent Gadamer, in "turning away from both a rationalist and a subjectivist interpretation of play, and thus remains close to Nietzsche's prerational view of play as *Spiel der Kräfte*."¹⁷⁶ Play is for Deleuze a fundamental mode of existence, even if he does not speak of the 'play of the world' or the 'play of being,' and to properly understand his philosophical project, we must understand play as a notion that grounds his thought at the same time that it itself remains groundless.

In his book on Nietzsche, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze emphasizes the two familiar aspects of prerational play we have seen in the Germans: "play as the innocent, exuberant, and excessive manifestation of power, and play as risk taking or as chance-necessity."¹⁷⁷ Existence itself is innocent in the same way a child at play is innocent – this spirit of play is the truth of multiplicity for Deleuze and "derives immediately from the principles of

¹⁷⁵ Spariosu. p.143-144.

¹⁷⁶ Spariosu. p.144.

¹⁷⁷ Spariosu. p.144.

the philosophy of force and will.”¹⁷⁸ Spariosu offers a good summary of Deleuze’s thought on humans as players and playthings in the world of forces he lays out in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*:

All that is relates to a force that interprets it. In turn, every force relates to what it can do, from which it is inseparable. It is this way of relating, of affirming or being affirmed, that is “innocent” and “just.” But modern man prefers to separate force from what it can do, and creates grotesque, slavelike representations of force and will. He splits the will in two, sets up a “neutral” subject with an ability to act or refrain from action, and thus becomes divided against himself, becomes a bad player...¹⁷⁹

Here Sparisou picks out a quote from *Nietzsche and Philosophy*:

Alas, we are bad players. Innocence is the game [*jeu*] of existence, of force and will. Existence affirmed and appreciated, force not separated, the will not divided in two [*dedoublee*] – this is the first approximation of innocence.¹⁸⁰

In this manner, like Nietzsche, Deleuze follows Heraclitus – the tragic thinker *par excellence* – who understood life on the basis of an instinct of play. All three see life as “an aesthetic phenomenon rather than a moral or religious one.”¹⁸¹ This makes Heraclitus the philosopher of the affirmation of becoming, as well, which both Nietzsche and Deleuze admire.

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze does more than analyze Nietzschean concepts as he originally used them. Deleuze advances those concepts and makes them his own:

being as becoming, unity as multiplicity, and repetition as difference, which will have a crucial role in his [Deleuze’s] later work and can hardly be understood outside Nietzsche’s notion of play as *Spiel der Kräfte*.¹⁸²

Deleuze argues that, when Heraclitus affirms becoming, he also affirms the inseparable concept of being of becoming (*l’etre du devenir*). These two affirmations are inseparable because there is no being beyond becoming; there is nothing beyond multiplicity. According to Deleuze, the

¹⁷⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Columbia Classics in Philosophy. Transl. Hugh Tomlinson. Columbia University Press. New York, NY. 1983. p.22.

¹⁷⁹ Spariosu. p.145.

¹⁸⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.23.

¹⁸¹ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.23.

¹⁸² Spariosu. p.145.

relationship between being and becoming – between one and many – can be understood in terms of a game (jeu) played by Dionysus, embodied three ways as an artist, a child, and a god.¹⁸³

Deleuze sees the affirmation of becoming and the affirmation of the being of becoming as Nietzsche does: the two moments of a throw of the dice (un coup de des), the Dionysian game. The first moment is the rolling of the dice, which is chance; the second moment is their coming to rest on the fatal number, which is necessity. “Their relationship is identical to that of the many and one, or becoming and being.”¹⁸⁴ Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s two-part dice game is a cornerstone of the former’s philosophy of affirmation. Like Nietzsche, Deleuze identifies chance with multiplicity, fragmentariness, and chaos and both philosophers see these notions not as threats to reason – as Plato saw them – but as an affirmation. “Necessity,” then, is not the abolition of chance, but rather the combination of chance itself.

There is only one combination of chance as such, one way of combining all the fragments of chance, one fatal number, and it is sufficient for the play to affirm chance only once in order to bring back the winning number, the number that allows him to repeat the dice throw. To affirm chance is to know how to play. But man is a bad player, because he counts on a great number of throws – on the use of causality and probability – to produce the winning combination. “To abolish chance by holding it in the grip of causality and finality, to anticipate a result instead of affirming necessity – these are all operations of a bad player” (p.27). To be a good player is to recognize that the universe is purposeless, that it has no cause or goal, and hence to affirm chance in one throw.”¹⁸⁵

In this way, Deleuze develops out of Nietzsche’s dice game the latter’s affirmation of necessity, which reunites all of the fragments of chance. Deleuze ties this into Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return, as well, noting that the repetition of the throw – the first moment – is also the eternal return, the return of chance itself. “For Nietzsche, in contrast to the whole metaphysical

¹⁸³ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.25.

¹⁸⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.26.

¹⁸⁵ Spinosu. p.145-146.

tradition, chance and necessity, chaos and cycle, becoming and eternal return are not mutually exclusive but rather two simultaneous moments of the same Dionysian game.”¹⁸⁶

This understanding of the play concept via Nietzsche appears throughout Deleuze’s works. In *The Logic of Sense* (1969), Deleuze constructs a series of paradoxes that he derives from the Stoic doctrine of the incorporeals. One of these paradoxes appears in a chapter entitled “Tenth series [of paradoxes]: On ideal play,” which presents what Deleuze calls a theory of “pure play” (*jeu pur*) – a consequence of his logic of pure becoming. There are, Deleuze suggests, two kinds of games: “ordinary” games and “ideal” or “pure” games. We encounter the former in everyday life – games of skill or chance that are governed by rational rules and refer us to “another kind of activity, work or morality, of whom they are a caricature or a counterpart, but whose elements they also integrate in a new order.”¹⁸⁷ Deleuze here provides Pascal’s Wager and Leibniz’s chess-playing God as examples. In these cases, play functions as a model only because they implicitly imitate nonplayful ones – “the moral model of the Good or the Better, the economic model of causes and effects, of means and ends.”¹⁸⁸ Ordinary games retain chance at certain points, leaving the rest to unfold according to the mechanisms of play structured by the rules – skill at the art of causality.

Pure games have a radically different attitude towards chance: they leave everything, the entire game, to chance. “They adopt chance in its totality and make it into an object of affirmation.”¹⁸⁹ Pure games have no rules; events can communicate with all others. Thus, the ideal game can be thought of only as nonsense (for this Deleuze refers to Lewis Carroll, Jorge Luis Borges, and Stéphane Mallarmé). Nonsense is a distribution of singularities that is difficult

¹⁸⁶ Spariosu. p.146

¹⁸⁷ Deleuze, Gilles. *Logic and Sense*. p.75

¹⁸⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. *Logic and Sense*. p.75

¹⁸⁹ Deleuze, Gilles. *Logic and Sense*. p.75

to interpret due to its complexity. Unlike ordinary games, ideal games cannot be dominated by dividing them, as they may be bifurcated infinitely without ever being negated.

Thus, there are two types of play that Deleuze utilizes in his philosophy: 1) the deep play of forces which combines bodies based on their active and passive determinations and 2) the pure play of effects-events, which can be called the play of simulacra and which affirms chance with each throw. The deep play of forces (later described in *Anti-Oedipus* as “desiring-machines” and the “body without organs”) involves bodies and their combinatory states while ideal or pure play involves art and philosophical thought. As Deleuze writes in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*:

For only thought can *affirm the totality* of chance, making it into an *object of affirmation*. And if one attempts to play this ideal game anywhere other than in the realm of thought, nothing takes place, and if one attempts to produce anything other than a work of art, nothing is produced. This is, then, the play reserved for thought and art, where there are only victories for those who know how to play, that is, how to affirm and ramify chance instead of dividing it *in order to* dominate it, *in order to* bet, *in order to* win. This play, which takes place only in thought and results only in a work of art, is also what makes thought and art real, disturbing the reality, the morality and the economy of the world.¹⁹⁰

Standing opposite Gadamer, who emphasized the rational aspect of play as art, in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze directs his polemic against rational notions of play. As Nietzsche reverses Plato’s judgement on good and bad forms of play, so too does Deleuze place the pure play of chance as the superior form. That is, play “without rules, without winners or losers, and without responsibility, a game of innocence and a Caucus race, where skill and chance are indistinguishable” is the kind of game that Deleuze prefers.¹⁹¹ At the same time, Deleuze posits that bad play is the type with “the loaded dice of Reason” that seeks to “control chance through repetition, causality, and morality.”¹⁹² In a clear allusion to Nietzsche, Deleuze calls normal or

¹⁹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.76.

¹⁹¹ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.76.

¹⁹² Spariosu. p.152-153.

ordinary games like Pascal's moralizing wager "foul play" (*tricherie*) and the economic combinations of Leibniz a "bad throw" (*mauvais coup*). These types of games are not "the world as the work of art" that Deleuze values.¹⁹³

This is perhaps the most complete reversal of Platonic or Kantian notions of play from among the artist-metaphysicians, a reversal that Deleuze endorses repeatedly throughout his works. For example, Deleuze openly associates art with philosophical thought – entirely the opposite of Kant or even Schiller, who viewed art as mere appearance. Like Nietzsche and the other artist-metaphysicians, Deleuze repeatedly claims that his writings are best understood as aesthetic play. Thus, good knowledge is now aesthetic knowledge, while rational knowledge is the lesser of the two. Philosophical justification comes not from truth and rational knowledge but rather through play – play for play's sake. While his work is still disciplined – Deleuze does not abandon Reason altogether – he does rediscover and reaffirm "the prerational beginnings of metaphysics in poetic thought as a playful manifestation of unmediated power."¹⁹⁴ Like the German followers of Heidegger, Deleuze situates his philosophy firmly in the realm of play, a move which is apparent in his unorthodox writing style, his favored modes of thought, and his emphasis on the autotelic nature of art and philosophy as forms of play.

4.12 The Play Concept as *Différance* in Grammatology – Jacques Derrida

Derrida inherits from Saussure and structural linguistics the concept of language as sign – that is, as signifier and signified – but interprets them in terms of *différance*: "a play (*jeu*) of differences and oppositions which generates and distributes meaning while it itself remains

¹⁹³ Deleuze, Gilles. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. p.76.

¹⁹⁴ Spariosu. p.153.

meaningless.”¹⁹⁵ Derrida coins this word (*différance*) to convey both “differing” and “deferring.” Thus, Derrida posits a “grammatology” – a philosophy of becoming where the present is being constantly “deferred” as an imaginary and absent origin. We exist in a web of language and interpretation which is established by tradition and which is altered slightly every time we hear or read an utterance – even if it is an utterance we have heard before. Words are defined by their difference to other words, and we arrive at our understanding of language by understanding those differences. Therefore, meaning is eternally postponed or deferred through an endless chain of signifiers – this is Derrida’s way of escaping the trap of metaphysics, which historically has relied on the concepts of substance or essence, that is, identity.

As the pure play of simulacra, *différance* has both spatiality and temporality. The spatial element can be traced back to Nietzsche’s play of forces (as interpreted by Deleuze) while the temporal element builds off of Heidegger’s ontological difference to create a play of events-effects wherein the present moment is always deferred forwards and backwards. Derrida claims that both of these elements (spatial and temporal) are inseparable and must be thought of as one and the same movement. Spariosu summarizes this aspect of Derrida’s philosophy nicely: “The play of *différance*, then, is Heidegger’s play of Being, understood as Nietzsche’s play of forces, in turn understood as Deleuze’s play of simulacra.”¹⁹⁶

In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” which was first presented as a lecture at the 1966 International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man at Johns Hopkins University and later published in 1967 as the tenth chapter of *Writing and Difference*, Derrida introduces his notion of “free play” (*jeu libre*) as something

¹⁹⁵ Spariosu. p.154.

¹⁹⁶ Spariosu. p.154.

equivalent to Deleuze's "pure" or "ideal" play and Fink's "play without player(s)."¹⁹⁷ Derrida argues that the traditional notions of structure and sign – in their relation to knowledge (*episteme*) and presence (*ousia*) – presuppose a "center" or point of presence, a fixed origin, found both outside of and within the structure. This center not only orients, balances, and organizes the structure but above all it makes sure that "the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure."¹⁹⁸

Derrida here identifies "the *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking on play" with the structuralist theme of "broken immediacy" which still "yearningly turns toward the absent, irretrievably lost origin."¹⁹⁹ The other side of structuralist thinking on play he formulates in terms of Deleuze's take on Nietzsche, though he recasts it in grammatological terms. Derrida opposes the reactive and nihilistic structuralist view of play to Nietzsche's joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming. This is a world without fault, truth, and origin which is offered to an active interpretation (not a reactive interpretation). The play concept thus features in a central position in Derrida's project, and he utilizes the notion of free play throughout his works.

4.13 The Play Concept as the Principle Organizing Function – James S. Hans

James S. Hans is Charles E. Taylor Professor of English at Wake Forest University. In his ambitious 1981 book, *The Play of the World*, which was ahead of its time and is (in my opinion) underappreciated in the philosophical discourse on play, Hans "purports to examine thoroughly the relationship of play to our daily lives and... argues that playful activity is fundamentally the

¹⁹⁷ Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," trans. A. Bass and R. Macksey, in *Writing and Difference*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL. 1978. Originally published in 1967. p. 278.

¹⁹⁸ Spariosu. p.155-156.

¹⁹⁹ Spariosu. p.156-157.

most important activity we undertake.”²⁰⁰ Play, according to Hans, is the structuring phenomenon that organizes and gives meaning to those activities that are most important in the world. He draws upon play theorists like Johan Huizinga, Friedrich Schiller, and Roger Caillois as well as philosophers including Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Fink, Gadamer, Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Rene Girard. “Play, production, and desire,” Hans argues, “come together insofar as play always involves and is always a part of production and desire. The relationship these words share is global in scope, affecting not only all of what we call ‘culture,’ but also all of what we call ‘nature.’”²⁰¹ The “essence of play is its capacity to saturate virtually every aspect of our lives, though not continuously,” and it is through this saturation that our values are created.²⁰²

If play describes the fundamental human activity, it must also have everything to do with how we make choices and how we give value to things through our choices. In one sense this study is devoted to an elaboration of the value of play, but it concludes with the argument that play has value for us because it is the activity that generates our values.²⁰³

The “playing out” of play is, for Hans, essentially “the back-and-forth movement” he associates with the concept of the hermeneutic circle (and which I have argued in previous chapters is the best essential definition of play). The hermeneutic circle refers to the process of understanding a text. it refers to the concept that one's understanding of a text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and one's understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole text. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines the hermeneutic circle thusly,

Central to hermeneutics, this concept [of the hermeneutic circle] is not only highly disputed but has also been developed in a number of distinct manners. Broadly, however, the concept of the hermeneutical circle signifies that, in interpretive experience, a new understanding is achieved not on the basis of

²⁰⁰ Hans, James S. *The Play of the World*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst, MA. 1981. p.v.

²⁰¹ Hans. p.xi.

²⁰² Hans. p.2.

²⁰³ Hans. p.xii.

already securely founded beliefs. Instead, a new understanding is achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings of those presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have.²⁰⁴

We can call this the “circularity of understanding.” Play, Hans argues, “begins with the putting-in-question, and proceeds, ideally, until some further understanding of that which has been put into question has been achieved.”²⁰⁵ This directed-but-still-free movement results in a self-forgetfulness that is associated (by Plato, Heidegger and many others) with “an awareness of one’s world that is not possible in a reflective, mediated view.”²⁰⁶ Following Gadamer, who said that when we have an experience, we come to possess it, enabling us to then predict what was previously unexpected,²⁰⁷ Hans argues that play very often provides the context for such experiences.

[Experience is] most often a negation of some previous experience, for we come to understand that things were not the way we thought they were. And then we continue to rely upon that experience until another one calls it into question... Without play these experiences are only possible in a violent way: we may not be playing with a fire when the burns we receive from it tell us we were wrong in thinking we could touch it. Within play, such experiences are necessary, or else we will eventually change the mode of our playing.²⁰⁸

For Hans, play is thus understood primarily as “an experimental mode of confirming or denying the connections we make with our world, and all experience within such a mode is confirmed or denied in the playing-out of the experience.”²⁰⁹

[Changes made] in the epistemological framework are only possible through play, for play itself is the field within which the ontological framework comes to be better understood; and it is that better understanding of the ontological framework

²⁰⁴ “Hermeneutics.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 1.3 The Hermeneutical Circle. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/> Retrieved 9/6/2021.

²⁰⁵ Hans. p. 8

²⁰⁶ Hans. p. 8

²⁰⁷ Gadamer. p. 317

²⁰⁸ Hans. p. 14

²⁰⁹ Hans. p. 12.

which in turn alters the epistemological framework and makes grafts onto the ontological possible.²¹⁰

Hans's book addresses several key aspects of play – from Deleuzean desiring-production in the play of capitalism (a topic I will revisit in Chapter 8) to Derridean language-play, from the aesthetic to the socioeconomic to the ethical – presenting a philosophy of play that is as close to comprehensive as anyone has managed (though his explanations are often simplistic and his examples are often vague). Nonetheless, Hans's book belongs in the canon of the philosophy of play.

4.14 Conclusions about the History of the Play Concept in Philosophical Discourse

It is clear from the philosophers covered in this chapter that the modern Western tradition shifts decidedly away from the Age of Reason notion of rational play as subservient to Reason towards a prerational and aesthetic notion of play. Spariosu summarizes this progression nicely:

As we have seen, Kant reintroduces, in a negative fashion, the notion of play in modern philosophy, subordinating its prerational (for him, 'irrational') forms to its Platonic or rational forms. Schiller openly calls the heuristic fictions of philosophy 'play,' and it is no accident that it is a poet-philosopher who first dares to take this step. He nevertheless remains within the Platonic fold, seeing art and aesthetics as a rational, nonviolent, and orderly manifestation of play. It is Nietzsche who first ventures beyond Plato, going back to the archaic sources of art and aesthetics in the violent, arbitrary, and innocent play of physical forces, thus reintroducing the prerational play concepts in modern philosophy. His heirs, the artist-metaphysicians, complete the reversal of Platonism or of what has come to be called 'Western metaphysics,' fully working out the theoretical and practical consequences of this reversal.²¹¹

Via Nietzsche and Heidegger, these artist-metaphysicians utilize a play concept that is ecstatic, innocent, and violent – a cosmic becoming. Gadamer's play concept is more rational than his peers' but retains its spontaneous and exuberant nature as movement or activity. In France,

²¹⁰ Hans, p. 22.

²¹¹ Spariosu, p.162-163.

Deleuze and Derrida expand on Nietzsche's play concept as the relentless collisions of active forces and present a picture of play "as an infinite, aleatory permutation of interchangeable elements, within a decentered structure or limitless series of events, linguistic and non-linguistic signs, or a combination thereof – the play of signs-events can also be called the 'play of repetition and difference' or the 'play of simulacra.'"²¹² All of these thinkers find purchase in the risk-taking element of play, and several (Fink, Deleuze, and Derrida) closely examine the element of chance in play.

These artist-metaphysicians do not ignore the rational play championed by Plato, Leibniz, Kant, Schiller, and German idealism in general – rather, they attempt to subordinate rational play to prerational play by demonstrating that the subjective will itself is less a player than a plaything to the overwhelming play of forces in the world. This can be understood as making cosmic play the primary mode of play and human play as valuable insofar as it resembles cosmic play. They critique Romantic voluntaristic notions of play with concepts like Fink's "game without a player" (*Spiel ohne Spieler*), Gadamer's "all playing is being played" (*alles Spielen ist ein Gespieltwerden*), Deleuze's "game of difference" (*Jeu de la difference*), and Derrida's "game of *différance*" (*jeu de la différance*). Rather than individual free agents, human beings are instead understood as Dasein – "who is both player and plaything in an impersonal, inscrutable, and unpredictable play of Being" (Fink, Gadamer) – or "as a genetic product or a differential function of the arbitrary, unconscious play of physical forces" (Deleuze, Derrida).^{213 214}

²¹² Spariosu. p.158.

²¹³ Spariosu. p.158.

²¹⁴ it is worth noting another significant difference between German and French philosophy in terms of the play concept is that the French present their notion of *simulacre* with a decidedly left-wing political bent while the Germans (perhaps in part because of Heidegger's brief but "highly dubious" political association in the 1930s) assign no political identity to the notion of *Erscheinung*. Even the French do not suggest that the play of simulacra are *inherently* politically charged (everyone agrees that the play of affirmative forces is innocent and politically blind), but rather their association with the politics of their time is a matter of personal preference or taste.

The Germans' critique of the Platonist notion of original-versus-copy hinges on the concept of *Erscheinung* (appearance), which erases the distinction between original Idea and copy, while the French prefer to use the concept of *simulacre*, which is concerned with the difference between copies themselves. "For both Deleuze and Derrida, the simulacrum is what Nietzsche understands by the will to power: the eternal play of the active or affirmative forces."²¹⁵ Both traditions can thus be understood as reversing the Platonic hierarchy and putting the power in the copy, though they go about this reversal in different ways. As Spariosu notes, all of them share Nietzsche's view of the world as *Spiel der Kräfte*; "the differences among the artist-metaphysicians finally boil down to the degree of freedom each of them is prepared to allow for this *Spiel*. From this point of view, Fink, Deleuze, and Derrida seem to allow more freedom of play to power than Gadamer does."²¹⁶ It is an American, Hans, who consolidates the efforts of the artist-metaphysicians – French and German – and completes the reversal from Plato's dismissal of play as mere mimicry to being the primary structurer of our values, culture, and hermeneutics. Play in Hans becomes the most important aspect of our lives, to which all other aspects are subordinate, including Reason. As it was with the Presocratics, prerational, cosmic play is more important than rational, human play as being the mode or vehicle for a primarily aesthetic existence.

²¹⁵ Spariosu. p.158-159.

²¹⁶ Spariosu. p.160.

CHAPTER 5. *ÓNTŌS* – PHENOMENOLOGY OF PLAY

“To play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human.” – Miguel Sicart²¹⁷

We have seen that play is essentially a rapid, random or whimsical to-and-fro movement, an attention-grabbing oscillation. I call the primary form of play “cosmic play” and associate it with Heraclitus’s ever-changing *kosmos* – physical forces clashing in a game without a player, and therefore as just and innocent as a child at play. Beneath the broad umbrella of cosmic play, there is a species of play we can call “animal play,” which introduces many new properties as a result of the complex and social nature of the two-fold instinct for play – boredom and fun. With animal play, we now have beings who choose to play and derive joy from it. This means the oscillation we identify as play occurs within the mind of the animal at play (an oscillation of possibilities) and its engagement with the world (actual physical oscillation). Consider the to-and-fro of a ball during a game of fetch with the dog, or the to-and-fro of the red laser pointer dot that drives the cat crazy. The ball and the laser pointer dot show us examples of cosmic play. And when we zoom in on the dog and the cat (and the human!), we recognize that their play is not just physical – it is also psychological.

Within animal play, we can speciate “human play,” a further subset that involves new complexities of its own, thanks to the active imagination and abstract, conceptual thinking with which humans are so gifted. Some of these complexities – on which the rest of this paper is focused – may very well occur in some form in animal play as well. However, since humans are the only animals who can tell us about their experience of play, we can only really talk with

²¹⁷ Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. MIT Press. Cambridge, MA. 2014.

certainty about the human experience of play. Besides, no animal game can compare to the intricacies of chess or videogames. And that is where we must start to examine human play: *the human experience of play*. Not only are all forms of human play fundamentally built from that first-person starting point (the situation one finds oneself in), but, as Fink tells us, play is an especially privileged experience in terms of appearance and reality – what it is like to play is deeply revealing to how we subjectively experience the world and the beings we encounter in it.

The philosophical field of phenomenology offers the most robust language with which to examine the experience of human play. According to phenomenologists, the experience of living is the ultimate source of all meaning and all values. Philosophical systems, scientific theories, aesthetic judgments – they all come from abstractions of the ebb and flow of the lived world. The task of the phenomenologist is to describe the mental structures of experience – consciousness, the imagination, relations with other beings, and the situatedness of the human subject in society and in history. In phenomenological theories of literature, works of art are seen as mediators between the consciousnesses of the artist and that of the viewer, or as attempts to disclose aspects of their being-in-their-world. Thus, our task in examining the phenomenology of play is to describe and analyze the human experience of play. In this chapter, I will give a brief explanation for what phenomenology entails by looking at some of Edmund Husserl's work and that of his students, Eugen Fink and Martin Heidegger. Especially with Fink, who writes a great deal about play specifically, I will offer an account of their key insights related to play. I will take assistance in the task of analyzing the phantasmagoria of play from Brian Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play*. Then I will move on to Heidegger's brand of phenomenology and his work on the topic of moods and boredom. I will also incorporate Lars Svendsen's *A Philosophy of Boredom* into this analysis of boredom. Then, I look at the work of psychologist Mihály

Csíkzentmihályi on the phenomenon of “flow” and how it relates to the experience of time and self during play.

5.1 The Intentionality of Play – Edmund Husserl

To understand how is play experienced, we must first turn our attention to how anything at all is experienced. The style or method of phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. In his *Logical Investigations*, Husserl strives to be rigorously “presuppositionless” by means of what he calls *Einklammerung*, the “phenomenological reduction” – he suspends judgement of the natural world to instead focus on analyzing experience. Following Kant’s argument that *noumena* (the fundamentally unknowable things-in-themselves) must be distinguished from *phenomena* (the world as it appears to one’s mind), Husserl agrees that the *appearance* of reality in our minds is what we experience, never the things-in-themselves. Furthermore, our experience of the appearance also includes our imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition – everything we perform or live through affects or modifies our experience of reality. Therefore, Husserl argues we must suspend our trust in our “natural” understanding of the world and focus on how beings *appear* to us in experience. The structure of possible experience includes extension and time, and we start to build our knowledge of the world around us from this given starting point. But Husserl’s big insight was that awareness and consciousness must be awareness and consciousness *of something*. From experience alone, we cannot distinguish between states of consciousness and objects of consciousness, nor can we know whether those objects of consciousness have an existence independent of our experience of them. For example, seeing a dog qualifies as an experience regardless of whether one sees the dog in person, in a hallucination, or in a dream. “Bracketing” the dog suspends any judgement about the dog as *noumenon* (the “reality” of the dog) and

instead analyses the *phenomenon* of the dog (our experience of seeing the dog) as constituted in intentional actions.

Husserl's "descriptive psychology" involves a fundamental distinction between *noesis* (the act of consciousness) and the *noemata* (the phenomena at which it is directed). *Noesis*, which is the part of an action that gives it a particular sense or character – like judging or perceiving a thing, loving or hating it, accepting or rejecting it, etc. – is real in the sense that it is actually part of what takes place in the actor's mind. For Husserl, the *noesis* is always correlated with a *noema*, an object of the intentionality in the *noesis*. The exact nature of this noetic content is hotly debated, but for our purposes here it suffices to say that, for Husserl, every intentional act has an "I-pole" (the origin of the *noesis*) and an "object-pole" (or *noema*) and the subject suffuses his or her experience of the object with a sense of this intentionality. When we come to know sensible objects through our "sensible intuition," our consciousness creates *Sachlage*, a "situation of affairs." This is a passive process wherein objects are presented to us as having qualities such as extension and duration. Through categorial intuition, we are able to constitute *Sachverhalt*, a "state of affairs." Often, we have several states of affairs going at once where we direct our intentions onto things as they appear to us.

So, what can be said about the intentionality of play? Certainly, every example of play involves the structure that Husserl describes, and one need not look far for instances where one projects a sense onto the reality of a game. In a soccer match, for example, the score is very much a part of the reality of the match, despite not being a physical "thing." The score is a sense we bring to the actual physical activity of playing soccer. At the same time, our aim, as soccer players, is to move the ball into the goal without using our hands. The ball thus involves our intentionality as we engage with it. For the soccer player (and often for the spectators watching

the game), the striving to put the ball in the goal is as much a part of the experience of the ball as the black and white pattern on the ball or its physical dimensions. The whole game hinges on the behavior of the ball – it is passed back and forth, it goes out of bounds, it is scooped up by the goalie, and so on. In this sense, the “game” exists in the minds of those participating in the match in a way that cannot be fully explained in strictly physical (or natural) terms.

For some play activities, such as games of make-believe, the game mostly exists in the minds of the players. When children play house, for example, their physical actions mimic what they have seen in their own homes, but they are able to “pour tea” without a teapot (or rather, with a non-actual teapot) and “drive to work” with neither a car nor a workplace (with a non-actual car and a non-actual workplace) beyond what is in their imaginations. Theater actors take on roles and so simultaneously present themselves as the-actor-on-stage and the character-being-played in the minds of the audience. In playing a videogame, “the player and the videogame come together during play to form particular modes of embodiment through which a videogame work is both interpreted and perceived” and “incorporate each other in reflexive cycles that mediate presence, attention, perception, and agency”²¹⁸. In this way, the experience of playing a videogame involves intentionality for virtual objects of engagement that occurs as much in the mind of the player as what is depicted physically on the screen or inputted through a device like a keyboard or controller. This creates a feedback loop where inputs result in outputs that effect future inputs which influence the subsequent outputs and so on. Given humanity’s capacity for abstract thinking, it is not surprising that human play is incredibly pervasive and diverse, the only practical limits being our imagination.

²¹⁸ Keogh, B. “A play of bodies: a phenomenology of videogame experience,” PhD diss., RMIT University, 2015. p.1.

I now want to turn our attention to two of Husserl's students who, in different ways, build off of their mentor's work and take the phenomenological project in very different directions. The more famous is undoubtedly Martin Heidegger, whose unfinished project *Sein und Zeit* [*Being and Time*] greatly influenced continental philosophy, but the philosopher more relevant to our current task is certainly Eugen Fink, whose magnum opus *Spiel als Weltsymbol* [*Play as Symbol of the World*] takes the phenomenology of play as its object of investigation. Heidegger shall be the next figure in our examination of the phenomenology of play.

5.2 Imagination and the Worldliness of Play

Eugen Fink was Edmund Husserl's research assistant during the final decade of the prominent phenomenologist's life, a period of time in which Husserl's philosophy was recast in a radical way. Later, Fink would become a follower of Martin Heidegger. It is said that Fink was a preferred conversation partner for both Husserl and Heidegger, and these discussions would strongly influence his own work, which is representative of phenomenological idealism.²¹⁹ The English translators for *Play as Symbol of the World* – Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner – rightly note that the book “constitute[s] the most intensive and comprehensive philosophical engagement with play in the twentieth century” (Fink, 1)²²⁰. In this remarkable book, only recently (2017) translated into English from the original German, Fink tackles the ontological problems surrounding the worldliness of the world and the actuality of beings in the world. Using Husserl's phenomenological method – with a twist of Heideggerian metaphysics – Fink lays out the metaphysical structure of being in the world. He notes that, while our relation

²¹⁹ Bruzina, Ronald. *Edmund Husserl & Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology 1928-1938*. Yale University Press. New Haven, CT. 2004.

²²⁰ Fink, Eugen. *Play as Symbol of the World*. Transl. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, IN. 2016.

to other beings in the world can be described in a number of ways, the language to describe our relation to the world itself is difficult to capture. This is because the world is not merely the biggest being, or the totality of all the beings within it. The world is something else – it is not like the beings it contains. In fact, Fink argues, our understanding of the world is remarkably scant, often referred to only in mystic or poetic ways. The best way to get at the worldliness of the world, Fink suggests, is through human play.

Human play has world-significance, has a cosmic transparency – it is one of the clearest world-figures of our finite existence. While playing, the human being does not remain in himself, does not remain in an enclosed domain of his psychic interiority – rather, he ecstatically steps out of and beyond himself in a cosmic gesture and interprets the whole of the world in a manner that is suffused with sense... Precisely as a human problem, human play is worldly – and as a worldly problem it points to the human being.²²¹

Fink thus sets about describing the phenomenological structure of play in the hope that it will shed some light on the worldliness of the world. The hope is that a player's relation to the playworld shares some important characteristics with Dasein's relation to the world in which they exist. Fink writes,

[Is] there already in human play, taken up as a phenomenon, a peculiar reference to the whole of the world? Is play essentially determined by a representational function? That is, in fact, the case – and it is the more profound reason for Heraclitus's cosmological metaphor. We must still clarify this and in the process elucidate play as an especially intense mode of the human relation to the world. In Heraclitus, gods and human beings stood in relation to "ever-living fire," were emulators and re-creators of the productive omni-potence. Their poietic power was grounded in the play of the world. As a result they were essentially players... even Plato still conceives the relation of the gods to human beings – as a game. He calls the human being a "plaything of God," a *paignion theou*.²²²

To delve deeper into this topic of the worldly character of play, Fink analyses the concept of 'actuality' – a property all beings in the world have – and 'non-actuality' – a property that

²²¹ Fink. p.46.

²²² Fink. p.52.

belongs to beings not in the world. For example, a particular horse has a number of properties – it is a certain color, a certain size, and it exists, it has actuality. But when we imagine a unicorn, we note that it also has a certain color and size, but it does not have the property of actuality, instead harboring the property of non-actuality. It exists only in our minds, not in the actual world. The horse is real, the unicorn is not. Seems simple enough.

However, Fink thinks the concept of actuality is more polysemous than that, arguing that the distinction between “actual” and “non-actual” is not exhaustively binary. Fink explains,

But we can represent “things” and “states of affairs,” imagine them, have them as representational images in our soul, “merely think of” something – and say that what is thus merely presented, merely imagined, merely thought of, exists only in our soul and not in “actuality.” Because we can “intend” and “imagine” beings and because it is sometimes difficult to separate what is merely in our soul and what is both intended by us and also actually existing, we can therefore ask whether “something” is actual or non-actual.²²³

Fink points out that, while what is imagined is nugatory and cannot be recognized in its claim to be actual, it is nevertheless more than “simply nothing.” Fink continues,

[Any imagined thing] exists as imagined, as a phantasm, as a representational content. What is merely represented is not something actual, but it is nevertheless itself actual as an intentional moment of an act of representing. An actual act of representing contains a sense of ‘non-actuality.’

We thereby see how the statement ‘either something is actual or non-actual’ contradicts itself in its operative presuppositions; for the ‘something which is not actual’ is nevertheless, for all that, itself actual as the act of representing something non-actual.²²⁴

Thus, there is a sense of actuality that even non-actual beings can inhere.

The harshness of the unreserved, blunt, and immediate common distinction between actuality and non-actuality cannot be maintained. There are not only actual and non-actual things – or, formulated more precisely, there *is* the “actual” and there *is not* the “non-actual” – but there is also the mediation between both; there is something actual that contains something non-actual as a represented, meaningful content. The chimera and other mythical creatures do not exist, but

²²³ Fink, p.52.

²²⁴ Fink. p.84.

there is the poetic, imaginary production of such mythical creatures, an actual consciousness of non-actual content.²²⁵

Fink's point here is interesting. He notes that (to use my earlier example), it is not quite right to simply say that the unicorn 'does not exist' – it *does* exist as a thought in my mind; my imagining of the unicorn exists in the world as a result of my thinking of it. Thus, the unicorn in my imagination has the property of non-actuality, but it is not quite right to simply leave it at that, because my consciousness exists in the world and it harbors the thought of the unicorn. Fink calls this "irreality" to capture the sense that it simultaneously exists (in a sense) and does not exist (in another sense).

This sense of irreality belongs especially to play activities. As Fink notes, all activities are actual: "To be sure, no one will dispute that play activities are actual, but, as activities of non-seriousness, they [play activities] bring with them a sense of 'non-actuality.'"²²⁶ While he does not name it, this sense of non-actuality accompanies make-believe, where objects and concepts are portrayed in the imagination and overlaid on top of the actual beings in play. A wooden block becomes a telephone as the player makes a ringing sound and mimes answering it. The player becomes a secretary as he pretends to busy himself with imaginary paperwork.

The moment of non-actuality of course emerges more starkly in those kinds of play involving portrayal. Whenever the player slips into a 'role' and wraps himself up therein, the activity of play becomes two-dimensional: there is at the same time the activity of the player and the activity of the human being *in* the playworld. What sort of strange character of 'non-actuality' belongs to a playworld? This non-actuality is not simply nothing, it is an 'appearance' that *is*, an existing appearance.²²⁷

To further explicate Fink's point here, an actor in a play takes on a role and becomes a character. In this portrayal, the character does not simply "not exist" – they *do* exist, but merely as an "as

²²⁵ Fink. p.84.

²²⁶ Fink. p.87.

²²⁷ Fink. p.87.

if’ that runs parallel to the actuality of the actor. The actor is both herself and the character she is portraying. The playworld created by the theater in the minds of the actors and audience is unreal – it is virtual, which is to say it exists but lacks the property of actuality. The playworld is ideal, yet real.

This brings Fink to the topic at hand – getting at the worldliness of the world. In addition to his or her relation to other beings in the world, the player also relates to the world itself.

The one playing takes hold of certain things – whether they have been prepared artfully and specifically for this or not – as ‘playthings.’ The thing *with* which he plays and the fellow human beings *with* whom he enters into a game are just as actual as he is – and also belong to the same dimension of actuality. But in their playing together they attain an unreal playworld in which they have their roles and which contains playthings of an imaginary character. Thus with human play an “unreal” sphere of sense bursts into a total actuality of real things and processes, a sphere that is here and not here, now and yet not now... the ‘playworld’ balks at a simple assimilation into the context of the actual world – that its ‘illusoriness’ prevents it from being placed alongside other things and contexts of things and from being assessed as something ‘actual.’ The playworld is an *appearance*, with the character of a *reproduction*...²²⁸

Fink’s word, translated here as “appearance,” is “Schein,” which also means “reproduction” or “reflection.” It carries with it the Kantian sense of the appearance of the world held in one’s mind, through which we sense the world and the beings in it.

In their playing together they [players] attain [*erspielen*] an unreal playworld in which they have their roles and which contains playthings of an imaginary character. Thus with human play an ‘unreal’ sphere of sense bursts into a total actuality of real things and processes, a sphere that is here and yet not here, now and yet not now. With the designation ‘unreal’ nothing at all is yet conceived at first but, rather, one only expresses that the ‘playworld’ balks at a simple assimilation into the context of the actual world – that its ‘illusoriness’ [*Scheinhaftigkeit*] prevents it from being placed alongside other things and contexts of things and from being assessed as something ‘actual.’ And if we designate the playworld as an ‘appearance [*Schein*],’ it thus comes down to expressly holding this playworld-appearance at a distance from the otherwise

²²⁸ Fink. p.205.

familiar appearance that belongs to the givenness of things as, for instance, 'superficial,' exterior, or rooted in a mistaken subjective conception.²²⁹

This is obviously true of games of make-believe, where the express purpose of the play activity is to replicate a scenario using props (often repurposed from their intended use) and the imagination. But this is also true of other play activities, as well, even those we would not call make-believe. In a soccer match, the score, the position of the players as it relates to being offsides, and the fouls called by the referee all exist in this unreal sphere of sense. They "exist" insofar as they are part of the real appearance in the minds of the players (and spectators) but they are not things one can hold.²³⁰ They do not have "actuality" the way, say, the soccer ball does.

Human play is an especially distinctive way in which existence relates with understanding to the whole of that which is, and in which it lets the whole resonate throughout it. In human play the whole of the world is reflected back into itself, letting features of in-finity emerge and shimmer in and on something innerworldly and finite. Play is an existentiell enactment that leads out from a purely immanent consideration of human things; it cannot be comprehended at all if one approaches the human being as a living being enclosed within itself, if one regards him as a being that has fixed properties adhering to it, if one consider him according to the general model of a substance with accidental determinations. Precisely to the extent that the human being is essentially determined by the possibility of play, he is determined by that which is unfathomable and indeterminate, that which is not fixed, that which is open, the dimension of the possible that undulates within the prevailing world that is reflected in him.²³¹

Human play involves the worldliness of the world in a special relation that reveals that worldliness to us. That to which we are open when we play is the world itself – or, more precisely, the appearance of the world in our minds. Because one can never get at the things in themselves, but only how they appear as phenomena, when one alters the appearance of things in

²²⁹ Fink. p.205.

²³⁰ As noted earlier, a scoreboard or other recordkeeping prop represents this mental game-state through graphism, but such devices are not necessary – the game can have a score even if it is not given physical form.

²³¹ Fink. p.206.

one's minds, one effectively changes their engagement with the world itself (by changing how the beings in the world are processed in one's mind). This makes play a privileged mode of being in the world because in our interactions with the playworld, we affect our experience of the actual world.

In human play an ecstase of existence towards the world takes place. Playing is, therefore, always more than merely some innerworldly human behavior, activity, or being-in-action. In play, the human being "transcends" himself, surmounts the determinations with which he has surrounded himself and within which he has "actualized" himself, makes the irrevocable decisions of his freedom revocable, as it were, leaps free from himself, and plunges from every fixed situation into the possibilities that stream forth in the primordial ground of life – he can always begin anew and cast off the burden of his life history. Such a characterization sounds ambivalent and immediately arouses protest – and yet everything hinges on this ambiguity.²³²

In playing, the human being replicates the worldliness of the world in the appearance of the playworld they hold in their mind as they play. This is what Fink means when he writes about play being the symbol of the world – it is through play that we come to understand the world as the meta-entity within which all beings are found. That structure – beings in a world – is replicated in the process of playing, and so Fink believes we can, through play, get past the limiting horizon of our experience of the world and get at the worldliness that seems so elusive.

"We sense an openness for living, an unlimitedness, an oscillating within sheer possibilities; we sense what we 'squander [*verspielen*]' in the act of decision, the playfulness [*das Spielhafte*] at the basis of freedom, the lack of responsibility at the root of all responsibility. And, within ourselves, we thereby touch on a depth of worlded Being in us, touch on the playing ground in the Being of all existing things. The 'ambivalence' of such a characteristic lies in the inevitable interweaving of the actual and non-actual. Play liberates us from freedom – but in a 'non-actual way.'²³³

²³² Fink. p.206-207.

²³³ Fink. p.207.

This ambivalence occurs when we blur the lines between actual and non-actual, as we do when we play, especially when we play using our imagination. The non-actuality of play reveals to us the essential relation of the human being to the world.

In the medium of ‘non-actuality’ the whole that is at work in all comes to appear within itself. The symbolic representation of the whole of the world in the midst of things cannot be a solidly actual thing or a human being’s solidly actual deed; rather, the world can only become illuminated in itself if it enters into the mysterious ambivalence of play, into its actual non-actuality. The world comes to appear [*erscheint*] in the appearance [*Schein*] of play: it shines back into itself [*scheint in sich selbst zuruck*] in taking on an intraworldly relation, even if in unreal form, taking on features of the prevailing whole.²³⁴

This notion of play “shining back into itself” is difficult to translate – it means the appearance of the world merged with the appearance of the playworld has in their nature something in common with the world writ large, and through that commonality, we can get at the worldliness of it by looking at the playworld, which is not concealed from our gaze the way the real world is – we have authorship in the playworld. That is, the playworld is worldly in certain ways, and because we exert some control over the appearance of the world, the playworld allows us insight into our relation to the real world as a model or simulacrum of it. Or, as Fink puts it, a *Weltsymbol* – a symbol of the world.

It is important to note a few features of this relation between the human being and the world, as it is documented in human play. Play does not present a relation between two separate things. Rather, as a relation, it precedes the differentiation of what is enclosed together within it. The world is not merely the largest or most comprehensive being – it is categorically different from the relations between the beings within it. This preceding human-world relation is always already present, because the human being is always open to the totality of the world with

²³⁴ Fink. p.207-208.

understanding, even if, as Fink suggests, “he may lose himself in intraworldly things and no longer see the forest for the trees.”²³⁵

We have for the most part forgotten the ‘forest’ of Being when we engage with things in earnest. In play’s exuberance, in its sense of lightness and its lack of responsibility, which treats beings as playthings and moves them about, we hold ourselves out into the expansive openness that resonates in everything – and in fact resemble ‘fowls of the air.’ Because the playful ecstase of the human being toward the world and the proof of the shining back of the whole of the world into the intraworldly symbol are the same relation, human play does not allow itself to be treated in an ‘enclosed’ anthropological thematization, does not merely allow itself to be described as a ‘behavior.’ The philosophical problem of play is always and necessarily *worldly*, insofar as it pertains to the *human being*.²³⁶

From our encounters with playworlds, we can see that the playworld has the same relation to us that the world has, or something close to it, and it is through play that we can attain an understanding of the human-world relation.

At first glance, it would seem that the confusing status of actuality and non-actuality in play represents a key difference between the playworld and the real world, where things are clearly either actual or not-actual. But in fact, Fink maintains that this very ambiguity is what allows the worldliness of the playworld to echo the worldliness of the real world. Without the problematic entanglement of actuality and non-actuality in play, without the blending of Being with appearance, the playworld could not serve as a mirror that reflects the worldliness of the world back at us. In play, we mix Being and appearance together without inhibition, and Fink’s interpretation of human play is concentrated in the question of what sense and what status is possessed by the ‘non-actuality’ of the ‘playworld’ belonging to every kind of play. What sense of Being does the imaginary scenery of a play have?

Both the metaphysical and the mythical interpretation of play [emphasize] the otherness of the playworld in comparison to ordinary things. The playworld is *less* than the ordinary sensuous thing, according to Plato’s metaphysics; it is only a

²³⁵ Fink. p.208.

²³⁶ Fink. p.208.

reproduction, only the reproductive mirroring of sensuous things, which for they part are reproductions of the truly existing ideas – it is thus a reproduction of a reproduction. The playworld is, notwithstanding its being bound to appearance, *more* than ordinary things – this was what we learned from myth. In the playworld-appearance the epiphany of the gods is carried out; the daemon is conjured in the mask. In the metaphysical degradation as in the mythical elevation of the playworld there are one-sided, and thus abstract, moments of truth. The playworld is neither ‘less’ nor ‘more’ in comparison to the rest of things; it is unique in that it is less and also more. **It is a symbol of the world in the medium of appearance.** That which is imaginary does not measure its status from its distance to things, neither to the ideas nor to the gods; it obtains its status and its significance from the human world-relation.²³⁷

Play allows us to create in the appearance of the playworld beings that are at once real (as imagined beings) and not-real (they have non-actuality). This affords us a degree of control over the appearance of the world in our minds, and through that control we can come to understand, at least a little bit, the worldliness of the world, what makes the world different from the beings within it.

5.3 Irreality of Child Phantasmagoria

Fink is not the only scholar who identifies play as a significant mode of being in the world. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith discusses childhood phantasmagoria and the ways in which the playworld is not an “accurate” representation of the actual world but rather something exaggerated and intensified. There is a difference in the playworld compared to the real world – namely, that the playworld adds something *more* to its appearance of the real world, *contra* Plato. Following his analysis of early childhood psychologists like Greta Fein, Sutton-Smith has this to say about playworlds:

Children’s play fantasies are not meant only to replicate the world, nor to be only its therapy; they are meant to fabricate another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life, a life often much more emotionally vivid than mundane reality. According to Fein, children give their play a structure,

²³⁷ Fink. p.208-209.

which is based on experiencing in a safe way the intense and even potentially disturbing emotional relationships of actuality or fantasy. Their play is not based primarily on a representation of everyday real events – as many prior investigators have supposed – so much as it is based on a fantasy of emotional events. The logic of play is the logic of dealing with emotions such as anger, approval, or fear, and it has to do with how these may be expressed and reacted to in any mundane or fantastic way that the players choose. What is remarkable about the Fein account (and it is much more complex than can be detailed here) is that it parallels the efforts of biologists who tell us that animal play also is not about realistic representations, that it is, rather, fragmentary, disorderly, and exaggerative, which are not forms of ‘realism.’ Similarly, folklorist Roger Abrahams says adult festivals are not mirrors of reality but are purposely made intense through distortion of everyday events, by including huge or dwarf creatures, firecrackers, ragtag costumes, grotesque masks, tricksters, and clowns.²³⁸

The playworld we create alongside the appearance of the real world we hold in our minds – which Plato dismisses as lesser and inferior – is also in some ways greater and superior because it amplifies our experience of the world and rearranges it according to play’s own non-literal, emotionally-attuned, dream-like logic.

The unreal worlds of play and festival are like that of the novel or the theater. They are about how to react emotionally to the experience of being in the world and how to temporarily vivify that experience by transcending its usual limits. Life in the ludic lane can never be understood simply in terms of that which it interprets realistically, the so-called real world. It must be about mockery as well as mimicry.²³⁹

Thus, the nature of a playworld is often one of fragmentary exaggeration and emotive potency, a funhouse mirror version of worldliness. This is why Fink suggests that the appearance (Schein) of the playworld is less a realistic representation of the world and more a reflection of what being in the world is like, of the worldliness of the world. The appearance includes our being in the world as part of our experience of the world. Sutton-Smith continues,

When there is well-developed imaginative play, there must always be some entry into nonliteral behavior, which leads to the introduction of acts or objects which are only for pretend purposes. Further, with time these play actions become increasingly original and unpredictable. Children know that they are manipulating

²³⁸ Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. First Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 2001. p.158-159.

²³⁹ Sutton-Smith. p.159.

their thoughts about reality, not reality itself; and they know that their play self is not the same as their everyday self.²⁴⁰

Sutton-Smith offers a useful metaphor for understanding how children (and, I would argue, adults using their imaginations, such as in a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*) approach the play activity of make-believe.

To understand a group of well-acquainted children at play, it is often useful to think of them like a traveling troupe of medieval players who arrive, set up their theater, and then begin performing (Breatherton, 1984²⁴¹; Griffin, 1984²⁴²). It is a world that is run more like a theater than like an everyday world. Children play the parts of stage managers, directors, and actors all at the same time, moving freely about the parts as they get ready to put together their own shows for themselves, and even if the show never gets off the ground, all of these activities are known to them as their “play” or their “games” (Magee, 1987²⁴³)... We are once again in the halfway world between fantasy being feeble or fantasy being too much to tolerate. But whatever we call it, children quickly establish their own autonomous cultures of play.”²⁴⁴

Performing actions with pretend properties or interacting with pretend objects blurs the line between actuality and non-actuality. After all, the interaction is actual, even if the object of that interaction is not. Similarly, actual beings can be appropriated for the purposes of play, becoming toys and gaining or losing make-believe properties as they are used in novel or unexpected ways. The “halfway world” shared amongst players is not limited to make-believe. The score of a soccer match exists in the appearance of play as well – it is virtual in that it is both intangible and real at the same time. The score does not have the property of actuality (one cannot hold the score in one’s hands), but it’s objective nature nonetheless affects the behavior of the players, the spectators, and the referees who are all actual. The state of affairs,

²⁴⁰ Sutton-Smith. p.159.

²⁴¹ J. Breatherton, *Symbolic play*. New York: Academic Press, 1984.

²⁴² H. Griffin, “The coordination of meaning in the creation of a shared make-believe reality”, New York: Academic Press, 1984.

²⁴³ M.A. Magee, “Social play as performance”, PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania. Ann Arbor, MI., 1987

²⁴⁴ Sutton-Smith. p.159.

phenomenologically speaking, includes the score as it is derived from the rules of the game and the actual events that make up the match.

Next, I will look at Heidegger's analysis of boredom as a mood. Nature has endowed us with the capacity for boredom in order to get us to play, so in that sense Heidegger's take on boredom is extremely instructive to our present purpose of detailing the phenomenology of play.

5.4 Boredom and Play

Another of Husserl's students, Martin Heidegger, criticized but also greatly expanded upon the former's work in phenomenology, but he took it in a different direction than his mentor. Heidegger uses phenomenology to develop a metaphysics of Being. Heidegger tells us that the subject-object relation that is central to Husserl's foundational science breaks down upon closer examination. When we use a doorknob, we might not even notice the object itself – the doorknob is ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) and is almost transparent to our consciousness. But should we turn the knob and it fails to open the door, we are confronted with the doorknob as a problem and it becomes present-at-hand (*vorhanden*), requiring us to become rational problem-solvers who are beings-in-the-world. In seeing something as present-at-hand, one is concerned only with the basic facts of the thing or concept as they are present in order to theorize about it. That's when all of Husserl's subject-object business comes up. Ready-to-hand is the primordial way of engaging with things or concepts – it is rare to take something as present-at-hand and relate to it as Husserl describes.

Throughout his long academic career, Heidegger was preoccupied with the question of the meaning of being. The central concept of Heidegger's philosophy is *Dasein*, literally, "being there." *Dasein* is the kind of being humans are: beings who are aware of being there in the world. In everyday German language the word "*Dasein*" means "life" or "existence." *Dasein* is

distinguished from all other beings by the fact that it makes an issue of its own being – it is the being for whom being is a concern. As *Da-sein*, it is the location, “*Da*”, for the disclosure of being, “*Sein*.”

Just as the pleasure of fun is the “carrot” motivator for play, boredom exists as the “stick,” a negative mood, cousin to disgust and frustration, that encourages us to seek out novel stimuli, often and most easily through play. Heidegger wrote extensively on the phenomenon of boredom in his 1929-30 lecture series *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. The *Langeweile* (literally “long time” in German) is an important aspect of the experience *Dasein* because it brings to our attention time itself. Heidegger believes that boredom is evidence to ourselves of our existence through our direct experience of time. This is described as an almost physical experience. Time becomes present-at-hand when it is usually hidden – we are usually “asleep” with regard to our own temporal existence, but this kind of boredom, which Heidegger calls “profound boredom,” wakes us up to our situatedness in time and brings to the fore the question of being. Heidegger describes the structure of this experience,

As an ontological structure of *Dasein*’s existence, attunement [*Befindlichkeit*] is a basic mode of existence in, and openness to, the world. As the ontic manifestation of attunement, moods [*Stimmungen*] are the various and specific ways in which *Dasein* can relate to and disclose the world, all of which occur against the backdrop of the structure of attunement. Insofar as attunement belongs to the structure of *Dasein*’s existence and insofar as it is always manifested through mood, *Dasein* is always in some mood, where even indifference is considered to be a mood.²⁴⁵

Boredom, part of our instincts for play, is an important mood – a basic structure of how we phenomenologically experience and engage with the world and the other beings we encounter in it.

²⁴⁵ Elpidorou, Andreas and Lauren Freeman, “Affectivity in Heidegger I: Moods and Emotions in *Being and Time*,” *Philosophy Compass*, Volume10, Issue10, October 2015. p.661-671.

In *A Philosophy of Boredom*, Lars Svendsen examines the history of boredom and its related topics. On Heidegger's treatment of boredom as a mood, he writes, "Moods, generally speaking, are seldom intentional subjects as far as we are concerned – they are precisely something one finds oneself *in*, not something one consciously looks *at*."²⁴⁶ Because our experience of the world occurs in our minds, as part of our mental life, moods are as much a part of the world as they are part of our selves.

Heidegger argues that precisely the fact that we are subject to moods indicates that they are *not* mere inner states that are projected onto a meaningless world. We cannot determine if a mood is something 'interior' or 'exterior' to the subject, as moods go beyond such a distinction and must be taken as a basic characteristic of our being-in-the-world. A change of mood must therefore also be taken as a change in the world... for we have no un-attuned world to compare it with...²⁴⁷

There are two forms of boredom that we must distinguish: emotional or situated boredom, where we find a particular something boring, and existential boredom, a mood where the world as such is boring. Heidegger's profound boredom, the kind that wakes us up to the question of being, is the latter form.

Broadly speaking we can say that an emotion normally has an intentional object, while a mood is objectless. Moods have to do with the totality of all objects, i.e., the world as a whole... I would claim that boredom can be an emotion but it can also be a mood. It is an emotion when one is bored by something specific and it is a mood when the world as such is boring. We can say situative boredom is often an emotion, while existential boredom is always a mood.²⁴⁸

How can a mood have such a powerful influence on our perception of our own situatedness?

Svendsen offers a Heideggerian answer:

A mood is not merely a strictly subjective determination nor is it strictly objective. It is in the actual polarity that exists between humans and their surroundings. It is basically via a mood that we relate to our surroundings... Being attuned is not merely an ontological determination of man, for it also makes up an epistemic condition for how objects convey meaning in various sorts of

²⁴⁶ Svendsen, Lars. *A Philosophy of Boredom*. Reaktion Books Ltd. Islington, London, England. 2005. p.14.

²⁴⁷ Svendsen. 110-111.

²⁴⁸ Svendsen. 110-111.

ways. A mood makes some experiences possible, other impossible. It conditions how the world – and therefore also all objects and events – appears to us.²⁴⁹

Heidegger makes boredom (as a mood) a central feature of his effort to awaken humanity's authenticity by forcing us to confront our own temporality. Most of the time, however, boredom instead causes us to seek out a new fascination, something to put us back to "sleep." In this view, play serves primarily as a distraction to keep us from confronting our ontological situation. It keeps us in the world, engaged with other beings, preoccupied with the objects of our attention and not thinking about being and time themselves.

Play, for Heidegger, is not a fruitful path for existential awakenings, but it does serve as a useful metaphor for the being of the world. Heidegger inherits much of his view of play from the Presocratics and from Nietzsche, who draws on the concept of play to describe the agonistic workings of power in the world – a *Machtphilosophie* of forces, a *Weltspiel*. Commenting on Heraclitus's fragment 52,²⁵⁰ Heidegger writes,

The dispensation of Being is a child at play, moving pieces on a board; it is to the child that the kingship belongs – 'kingship' meaning the *arche*, that is, what grounds, constitutes, rules: Being for the being. The dispensation of Being – a child at play... Why does the great child, whom Heraclitus has seen in the *aion*, play? He plays because he plays. The 'because' disappears in the game. The game is without why. He plays while he plays [*er spielt weil er spielt*]. What remains is play – the highest and the deepest. (Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* [*The Principle of Ground*], 189)²⁵¹

This poetic, metaphysical interpretation of play offers some insight into the phenomenology of play, but for the most part Heidegger is only interested in play as a metaphor for being. He is uninterested in play activities themselves, beyond their usefulness as a metaphor for the "play of the world." While boredom seems to stretch time out and makes us keenly aware of ourselves,

²⁴⁹ Svendsen. 111.

²⁵⁰ "The course of the world is a child playing, who moves the pieces on the board here and there, is a child's kingdom."

²⁵¹ Heidegger, Martin. *Der Satz vom Grund*. Neske. Pfullingen, Germany. 1957. p.189.

play can also have the opposite effect, where time flies by without our notice and our sense of self is diminished or suppressed completely. To examine this state of being, we now turn to the work of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi.

5.5 Play and the Flow State

Play and its related moods can exert a strong influence on our experience of time and self. It is a common aphorism that time flies when you're having fun, and it is well known that boredom makes time to seem to drag on and on unless we can find something to hold our interest. The phenomenology of play includes both these phenomena, even though it is certainly possible to have fun without playing and to relieve boredom without playing – play is just the easiest and most common way to have fun and dispel boredom. In psychology, the mental state of operation where one is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus and enjoyment in an activity is called a “flow state.” Named by Hungarian-American positive psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in several of his books and papers on the subject, the flow state is identified by six factors:²⁵²

1. Intense and focused concentration on the present moment
2. Merging of action and awareness
3. A loss of reflective self-consciousness
4. A sense of personal control or agency over the situation or activity
5. A distortion of temporal experience, one's subjective experience of time is altered
6. Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, also referred to as autotelic experience

²⁵² Nakamura, J. and M. Csikszentmihályi. “Flow Theory and Research”. In C. R. Snyder, Erik Wright, and Shane J. Lopez (ed.). *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK. 2001. p.195–206.

These aspects can certainly be experienced without the others, but a flow state must have them all.

Csikszentmihályi defines flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”

[Flow is] the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter... concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted.²⁵³

Csikszentmihályi interviewed dozens of individuals who “get lost” in their work: painters, Formula One racecar drivers, yoga instructors, jazz musicians, chess masters, mathematicians, and others. One composer said,

You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I have experienced this time and again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching it in a state of awe and wonderment. And [the music] just flows out of itself.²⁵⁴

This experience is cross cultural – *Vedas*, the sacred texts of the most ancient Hindu philosophy, refers to forgetting time and space and going beyond the mind during *dhyana* [meditation]. Hindu texts on Advaita philosophy such as *Ashtavakra Gita* and the Yoga of Knowledge such as *Bhagavad-Gita* refer to a similar state. Buddhism and Taoism also speak of a state of mind known as *wu wei* – “doing without doing” – and the “action of inaction” which perfectly describe the flow state. All these sources use the same language to describe entering and maintaining the flow state.

²⁵³ Csikszentmihályi, Mihaly. TED Talk. “Flow, the Secret to Happiness.” 2004.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXIeFJCqsPs> Accessed 10/13/2021.

²⁵⁴ Csikszentmihályi. “Flow, the Secret to Happiness.”

Psychologists have found that the human mind can process a certain amount of information at a time. For the most part, people can decide what they want to focus their attention on (with the exception of innate bodily feelings like hunger and pain). However, when in a flow state, people are completely engrossed with one task at hand and, without making the conscious decision to do so, they lose awareness of all other things: time, people, distractions, and even basic bodily needs. This occurs because all of their attention is on the task at hand; they simply have no more processing power to spare.

To say his self disappears seems like a romantic exaggeration, but our neurology is only capable of processing about 110 bits of information per second. When you are involved in this completely engaging process of creating something new, you don't have enough attention left over to monitor how his body feels, whether he is hungry or tired. So, his sense of existence is temporarily suspended during this automatic, spontaneous process where he watches his hand writing. This can only happen for people who are very well trained and who has developed technique. When he says the music just "flows out," he uses a very common description for this kind of effortless, spontaneous experience – this is why Csikszentmihalyi calls it a "flow experience." Poets, Olympic figure skaters, CEOs, and Albert Einstein all report similar experiences when practicing their crafts.²⁵⁵

Interestingly, this has led Csikszentmihályi to promote the flow state (and thus, play) as the "optimal experience" as it results in a high level of performance and gratification. People's lives would be much improved, Csikszentmihályi argues, if they achieved the flow state more often.

When we talk of great civilizations – Greek, Hindu, Egyptians, what have you – we focus on their ecstasies – the temples they built to experience a different reality, the circuses, arenas, and theaters, where they could experience life in a more concentrated, more ordered form. But this composer does not need to go to those places to experience ecstasy – to access a different reality, he needs only a piece of paper where he can put down little marks and imagine sounds that had not existed before in that particular combination.²⁵⁶ To that end, much of

²⁵⁵ Csikszentmihályi. "Flow, the Secret to Happiness."

²⁵⁶ Csikszentmihályi. "Flow, the Secret to Happiness."

Csikszentmihályi's research postulates the conditions required to achieve a flow state on demand, as it were. Flow theory postulates three conditions that have to be met to achieve a flow state:²⁵⁷

1. One must be involved in an activity with a clear set of goals and progress. This adds direction and structure to the task.
2. The task at hand must have clear and immediate feedback. This helps the person negotiate any changing demands and allows them to adjust their performance to maintain the flow state.
3. One must have a good balance between the *perceived* challenges of the task at hand and their own *perceived* skills. One must have confidence in one's ability to complete the task at hand.

In other words, flow occurs when one attempts a challenging task that they feel they can achieve.

Csikszentmihályi defines play as “a state of experience in which the actor's ability to act matches the requirements for action in his environment.”²⁵⁸

Arousal is where people learn the most – their skills are not quite up to the challenge they are facing. Control is also a good place to be, because there you feel comfortable but not very excited. It's not very challenging anymore. In both Arousal and Control, it is relatively easy to enter a flow state by increasing your skill level or the challenge level, respectively. The other combinations of challenge and skill become progressively less optimal. Apathy is very negative – you don't feel that you're doing anything, you don't use your skills, there's no challenge.

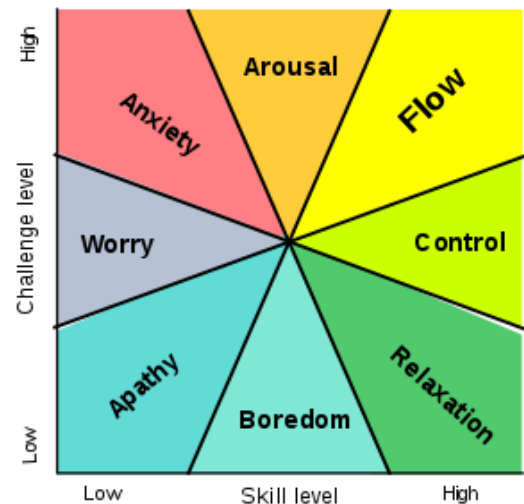


Figure 1: Csikszentmihályi's Experience Fluctuation Model

²⁵⁷ Csikszentmihályi, Mihaly, S. Abuhamdeh and J. Nakamura. "Flow". in A. Elliot (ed.), *Handbook of Competence and Motivation*, New York: The Guilford Press, 2005. p.598–698.

²⁵⁸ Csikszentmihályi, Mihaly and Stith Bennett. "An Exploratory Model of Play". *American Anthropologist*. New Series, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Feb., 1971). Published By: Wiley. p.45-58.

Play is an ideal activity for flow – clear goals, immediate feedback, and confidence in the possibility of success are all aspects common to play activities. Getting “in the zone” is a common experience players have – well-designed games afford this exact kind of experience. The loss of time and the loss of an awareness of self represent drastic changes to the player’s phenomenological experience, as does the feeling of satisfaction it sometimes generates. These aspects of play and flow can be thought of in terms of the two-fold instinct we have for fun and boredom, as mentioned previously. We evolved the capacity for the flow state precisely because it causes us to seek out creative or skill-based challenges and feel rewarded for our successes. With boredom, time stretches out and one is made painfully aware of one’s self. Entering a flow state in play results in the opposite temporal effect, when time and self are forgotten and the individual is completely absorbed in their task. Thus, boredom and flow are two sides of the same phenomenological coin.

5.6 Conclusions on the Phenomenology of Play

Before we move on to explore human play in all its diversity and ubiquity, it was important to look at the features of the experience of play. Compared to cosmic play or animal play, we have far more information on specifically human play because it is something everyone experiences at some time, and they can talk about it. Animals can only tell us about their play through their behaviors, and we can get at cosmic play through observation and through myth, but with human play, we almost have too much information. Everyone has a first-person account of their own play, and that body of knowledge is so complex and diverse that some scholars have claimed it is simply too large to be sufficiently described by a single theory.

From Husserl’s phenomenological reduction we know that consciousness is always consciousness *of something*, and, following Kant, we know that we experience only the

appearance of objects, never the object itself. From this combination of intentionality and appearance we constitute *Sachverhalt*, a “state of affairs,” as phenomena present themselves. The engagement of play results in a feedback loop of inputs and outputs as the phenomena of play occurs as much in the mind of the player as in physical reality (which the mind of the player can never get at directly).

Heidegger introduces us to *Dasein*, the “location” where the disclosure of being occurs. He introduces the useful distinction between ready-at-hand and present-at-hand in the directedness of the experience of beings in the world. But, most importantly for play, Heidegger’s take on the experience of boredom is very instructive in examining how *Stimmungen* [moods] influence the appearance we hold in our minds of the world. Our experience of time and space is altered in our minds in response to boredom or play.

Csikszentmihályi provides us with the other side of the coin – opposite boredom we find flow. Time, extension, and our directedness are altered here as well, but unlike with boredom, they seem to disappear when we are in a flow state. Even our sense of self is suspended in a flow state, which brings with it a meditateness that leads Csikszentmihályi to suggest that achieving flow states is the key to human flourishing.

Fink brings us the phenomenological project most relevant to play with his treatment of the non-actuality of playworlds and the complex nature of appearance and reality in play. When we make-believe, we replicate the worldliness of the world in the appearance of the playworld we hold in our minds as we play, allowing us to get at the nature of the world itself. In this way, a group of people at play resembles a traveling troupe of performers, as Sutton-Smith suggests. We exaggerate reality in our playworlds, making them *more* than what we encounter in reality – more emotional, more dreamlike.

Like animal play, human play is largely defined by behavior. But while animal play is relatively homogenous (always involving a physical to-and-fro), humanity's abstract thinking combined with play's ability to impose a playworld on top of the actual world result in a seemingly infinite array of play behaviors. Like cosmic play, human play is essentially a to-and-fro oscillation but, for the most part, it is *ideas* that oscillate in human play, rather than physical objects (although plenty of forms of human play do involve a physical to-and-fro motion). A joke is entertaining because of the difference between expectation and result – a word is replaced with a similar sounding word that changes the meaning of the statement, or a concept is reiterated in a way that carries more than one possible meaning. The contrast between the supposed and actual meaning of the concept – this is often the “to-and-fro” of human play.

We do not experience the world directly – instead, our sensory organs provide our minds with an appearance of the world. While we operate as though this appearance relates directly to real beings in the world, the truth is that we never get at the things in themselves, the *noumena*. Furthermore, this appearance is mutable. Our experience of the world includes not just the appearance of phenomena but also our subjective mood or intentionality, which can alter the phenomena we experience. Boredom, one of the great motivators for play, seems to draw time out and makes us more keenly aware of our own disgust at having nothing interesting to do or see. Thus, a person who is bored experiences perceiving a cat contrarily than a person who is not bored, who might experience the same cat differently. We can also alter our experience of reality willfully – our intentionality colors our experience of phenomena; our experience is always the experience *of something*. Additionally, with make-believe we can add beings to our appearance of the world that are non-actual beings – they exist only in our imagination, which gives them an ambiguous actuality as purely mental beings. Our thoughts of them are real, even if they are not.

Human play makes extensive use of this divide between the world and our experience of it. In many ways, human play relies on the buffer between beings in the world and our subjective experience of them as phenomena because the appearance of the world is mutable and thus open to playfulness.

This is why the phenomenology of play is so important to understanding human play. Our situatedness is vital to this conceptual oscillation, and human play is experienced as part of our engagement with the world. We have an instinct for it – it is a fundamental part of the human experience, like dreaming or eating. All the other aspects of play explored in the remainder of this dissertation – how we learn through play, how we express ourselves through play, the ethical character of play, and how play creates culture – all begin and end with the phenomenological experience of play because play is something we do, something that we enact and live through. Play is an ontologically privileged mode of being in the world.

CHAPTER 6. *LÓGOS* – REASON AND PLAY

“Play is the only way the highest intelligence of humankind can unfold.”
– Joseph Chilton Pearce

In this chapter I will explore the relationship between play and the faculty of reason by examining play in terms of learning, unpredictability, and strategy. These three perspectives should provide a clearer understanding of how play shapes our ability to reason (by teaching us how to reason as children) and how reason shapes our play (by helping us form strategies for successful play). Play is a challenging decision-problem with a particular epistemic structure, and is our first and greatest teacher of interacting with the world. The main operator within play that allows it to be all these things is unpredictability, which is also responsible for the prime motivator of play: fun. Unpredictability involves not-knowing, chance, and fate: three subtly different senses of the word, all of which appear in cases of play. Our attempts to master unpredictability can be seen in the field of game theory; the study of strategy offers what is perhaps the purest example of the role reason plays in play – play rendered mathematically. To play a game seriously is to attempt to master it, to become literate in it and learn all of its ins and outs, to become proficient with its systems. Long after play has taught us how to learn as children, it continues to require us to learn into adulthood – sometimes lessons in a topic and sometimes just the activity itself.

This chapter is made up of three parts: play and learning, play and unpredictability, and play and strategy. They cover the topics of cognitive development, the role of unpredictability in play, and game theory to help illustrate the ways knowledge and reason operate in play activities and how those play activities help us learn and think in the first place. First, I will present the work of James Paul Gee on the subject of game literacy to demonstrate how one learns through

play. Next, as part of this section on learning I will touch on the work of Jean Piaget in the field of childhood cognitive development and the role of play in that process. Finally, I will end this section on learning by connecting the topic of learning with the topic of unpredictability, the latter of which will be the focus in the second section of this chapter.

Unpredictability is found in all forms of play, and I will begin the second section of this chapter identifying it in the four types of play classified by Roger Caillois – *alea*, *agon*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. I will then identify the unpredictable element in jokes and storytelling, and the role of tension and revelation in the epistemic structure of those practices. Following that, I will address the different terminology used to discuss unpredictability and how those words have typically been used. Next, I will present a short history of unpredictable games based on the work of Mark R. Johnson, whose book *The Unpredictability of Gameplay* will also provide a classification system for different types of unpredictability in gameplay and a Deleuzean take on randomness in play. Finally, Johnson's framework will provide an explanation of some common gaming practices relating to unpredictability, repetition, and difference.

Having looked at how play shapes our faculty of reason in the first section, in the third and final section of this chapter I will turn to game theory to show how our faculty of reason shapes our play as strategy and optimization. I will define game theory as a particular branch of decision theory and will look at the epistemic nature of games when viewed through this lens. The Prisoner's Dilemma will provide a well-known example of the sort of reason being invoked in this context of play, followed by a short account of some of the most important concepts to come out of game theory. With that, I will conclude the chapter with a short summary of the topics that have been covered.

6.1 Play and Learning

6.1.1 Games and Literacy

What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy is a book by American researcher James Paul Gee that focuses on the learning principles in videogames and how these principles can be applied to the classroom. When they are successful, when they are well-designed, video games challenge players. They motivate players to persevere through trials and simultaneously teach players how to better play the game. These games offer a glimpse of how one might create new and more powerful ways to learn in schools, communities, and workplaces. Gee identifies thirty-six learning principles that are present in (but not exclusive to) the design of good videogames. He further argues for the application of these principles into the classroom environment. *What Video Games Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* calls on educators, teachers, parents and administrators to enhance their approach to pedagogy by taking lessons from game design. Gee explains,

The dilemma is this: For efficacious learning, humans need overt information, but they have a hard time handling it. They also need immersion in actual contexts of practice, but they can find such contents confusing without overt information and guidance. This is just the dilemma between overt telling versus immersion in practice that has characterized educational debates for years. The makers of videogames – good capitalists that they are – have no such luxury [to debate theory]. If they don't solve this problem, no one is going to learn to play their games.²⁵⁹

Thus, Gee examines in detail several video games to unpack the ways they encourage learning through play principles, hoping to discover ways of bringing those techniques to the classroom. In undertaking this project, Gee demonstrates that play is always a process of learning literacy in

²⁵⁹ Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. St. Martin's Griffin; 2nd Edition. 2007. p.114.

that play activity; his task is to direct that learning towards literacy in traditional educational targets.

Gee maintains that reading and writing ought to be viewed as more than mere mental achievements happening inside one's mind. They should also be seen as "social and cultural practices with economic, historical, and political implications."²⁶⁰ So, in Gee's view, literacies are multiple and are inherently connected to social practices. In order to expand the traditional view of literacy beyond print literacy, Gee recommends that we think first of literacy in terms of semiotic domains. A semiotic domain recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, and so forth) to communicate distinctive types of messages. Gee thinks we become fluent in a semiotic domain through engagement with it. By the word "fluent" here Gee means that the learner achieves some degree of mastery, not just rote knowledge.²⁶¹

Gee takes a personal approach to explaining how the immersive, interactive world of a videogame engages the player in ways that formal education sometimes falls short of achieving. Players do not usually read the manual before playing a game, he argues. They play the game and then look at the manual. He suggests that this is what is required of students when they are asked to read a textbook before the information is put in context—before they get to "play the game." Gee takes an optimistic view of videogames, gathering a list of learning principles commonly found in these games.

I have selected three of Gee's thirty-six lessons that exemplify learning through play (and not necessarily videogame design, which is Gee's focus). The "Psychosocial Moratorium Principle" states that "Learners can take risks in a space where real-world consequences are

²⁶⁰ Gee. p.8.

²⁶¹ Gee. p.8-18.

lowered.” Play activities (like the videogames Gee analyses but also in many other forms of play) impart knowledge to players best when the real-world stakes are at an acceptably reduced level. This encourages the sort of bold attempts that tend to reveal unexpected paths to success. Innovation is born from these attempts, and play affords us an excellent vehicle in which to attempt them. This is due to what ego psychologist Eric Erickson calls the *psychosocial moratorium* – where the subject cares about what they do but the cost of caring is not prohibitive.²⁶²

The “Self-Knowledge Principle” of game design states that “The virtual world is constructed in such a way that learners learn not only about the domain but about themselves and their current and potential capabilities.”²⁶³ Play – when it is engaging and amusing – can be an excellent teacher when it comes to self-knowledge, as well as game-knowledge or world-knowledge. New aspects of a person’s character can be revealed through play, even to oneself. More about this in the next chapter; for now, it suffices to say that identities (often multiple identities at once) play a large role in the play of adults and children, and by taking on new identities in play one can find an identity that suits them (or one they soundly reject).

The “Probing Principle” highlights the “cycle of probing the world (doing something); reflecting in and on this action and, on this basis, forming a hypothesis; reprobing the world to test this- hypothesis; and then accepting or rethinking the hypothesis.”²⁶⁴ It is clear why this aspect of videogame design (found in many other play activities as well) encourages the creation of new knowledge and the way play involves itself in the development of children’s cognitive abilities. This feedback loop of inputs and outputs is best powered by intrinsic motivation to

²⁶² Oxford Reference.com. “psychosocial moratorium”
<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100352910> Retrieved 10/11/2021.

²⁶³ Gee. p.64.

²⁶⁴ Gee. p.105.

propel it along, and play often obeys the “Amplification of Input Principle” – for a little input, learners (players) get a lot of output.²⁶⁵ This results in a feedback loop of positive reinforcement where small actions on the part of the player/learner result in big responses from the play system.

Why do well-designed videogames teach players so well? Play is a process of learning and experimenting, but so are many educational classes. What makes the difference? I argue that the key difference – what makes play so efficacious at teaching – is the intrinsic motivation provided by *fun*. All the lessons Gee urges educators to take from videogame design are rooted in the somewhat ephemeral concept of amusement. This answer raises only more questions, however. What is it about the oscillation of play that entrances us? Where does fun – our fascination with the to-and-fro of play – come from? Amusement is fundamentally about unpredictability and that relationship is at the heart of the epistemology of gameplay and the logic utilized when players play a game. Play is fun in part because of its unpredictable nature – the shift from not-knowing to the revelation of the result of play generates fun in the player and those observing the player. Will the receiver catch the football? What new meaning will be introduced at the punchline of a joke? Is my opponent bluffing or not? When the ball is caught (or not), when the punchline is delivered, when the cards are revealed and when the pot goes to the winner, we experience fun. Trying to make successful predictions and maneuvering play systems to maximize one’s chances are fundamental pillars of play activities. Understanding the predictive systems involved – becoming literate in their semiotic domain(s) – is at the heart of human play.

In this sense, play is always a learning process and is, in fact, central to developing our learning capabilities as children. Play teaches us how to learn and reason in the first place. For

²⁶⁵ Gee. p.64.

children, play (especially representational play) is an essential part of our cognitive development as our brains continue to grow and new neural connections are made that engender us with the ability to think metaphorically, to be comfortable with ambiguity, and to associate signs with their meanings – all vital aspects of knowledge acquisition and critical thinking. As we know from the seminal work of Jean Piaget, our ability to reason is developed through play because play is repetitious and encourages experimentation, the creative manipulation of objects and (perhaps most importantly) the interrelation of concepts. After all, the knowledge state of a player somewhat determines their behavior. The epistemic structure responsible for amusement is also responsible for teaching developing minds how to learn, precisely because play involves a field of knowledge and unpredictability with which to engage. To play a game is to learn a task, master a strategy, or develop a skill. In this sense, games are inherently educational and social.

6.1.2 Childhood Development

We know from Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget that, even from infancy, the desire to learn and to know is a built-in feature of our minds. In *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, Piaget describes in great detail the early processes of human cognitive development. We learn new information over time by attaching our discoveries to meanings from prior experiences. Piaget, a biologist, is interested in the ways organisms adapt to their environment, a process he describes as “intelligence.” Individual organisms develop structures to mentally represent the world and use them to determine their behavior. This adaptation to the environment comes from a biological drive to obtain equilibration – a balance between schema and the environment.

Piaget’s hypothesis is that newborn infants come with built-in schema that he calls “reflexes.” In other organisms, these reflexes control behavior throughout their entire lives.

While human infants use these reflexes to adapt to the environment at first, they soon add constructed schema to their mental representation of the environment. Central to Piaget's theory is the concept of cognitive structures – as schemes become more and more complex and therefore motivate more complex behavior, they become “structures.” Structures are the patterns of action – mental or physical – that underlie specific acts of intelligence. Piaget says structures come to be organized in a hierarchical manner – from general to specific – as they become more complex.²⁶⁶

Cognitive development involves two processes – assimilation and accommodation – and cognitive growth results from their continuous intertwining. “Assimilation” is the process of using or transforming the environment so that it can be placed in cognitive structures that already exist in the person’s mental representation of the world. One assimilates when one modifies or changes new information to fit into one’s existing schemas, keeping new information or experience and adding to what already exists in one’s mind. “Accommodation” is the process of accepting something new from the environment that actually changes cognitive structures themselves. One accommodates when problems posed by the environment cause one to modify or restructure one’s existing schemas so that new information can fit better. Throughout a person’s life, both processes are used concurrently. When accommodation has primacy over assimilation, Piaget calls it imitation. When assimilation has primacy over accommodation, it is play – what he calls “functional or reproductive assimilation,” done merely for the “free satisfaction” of repeating the behavior.²⁶⁷ As the child develops, they gradually adapt symbolic imagination and rules-based reasoning in ever more complex ways. By adulthood, the sensory-

²⁶⁶ Massey University. “Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.” <https://www.massey.ac.nz/~wwpapajl/evolution/assign2/DD/theory.html> Retrieved 10/11/2021.

²⁶⁷ Piaget, Jean. Trans. G. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson. *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*. WW Norton & Company. New York, NY. 1962. p.87.

motor practice games and simple symbolic games have been replaced with socialized games governed by rules.

It can be difficult to distinguish play from non-ludic activities, especially in very young children. Despite this ambiguity, Piaget endeavors to find an interpretation of play by examining its position in the general context of children's thoughts. Play begins, he argues, with the dissociation between assimilation and accommodation. From the very first stages of life, in what Piaget calls the sensorimotor stage, play is present in the form of purely reflex adaptations, pleasurable to the child simply because the child is the cause.

After learning to grasp, swing, throw, etc., which involve both an effort of accommodation to new situations, and an effort of repetition, reproduction and generalization, which are the elements of assimilation, the child sooner or later (often even during the learning period) grasps for the pleasure of grasping, swings for the sake of swinging, etc. In a word, he repeats his behavior not in any further effort to learn or investigate, but for the mere joy of mastering it and of showing off to himself his own power of subduing reality... Since it requires neither thought nor social life, practice play can be explained as the direct result of the primacy of assimilation.²⁶⁸

Sensory-motor play is both the simplest and easiest form of play to understand. Having mastered the relatively simple literacy of "grasping at objects" or "swinging objects," the child revels in their newfound proficiency. There is no deeper meaning in these actions – the child is simply enjoying the skill they have attained by enacting it for its own sake. This behavior continues into the next stages of development, but the child will learn more sophisticated schema with more sophisticated ways of enacting them.

By observing sequences of play, Piaget is able to demonstrate that, towards the end of the second year, in the pre-operational stage, children's play involves the manipulation of symbols and symbolic meanings. This form of play occurs when objects are played with as though they

²⁶⁸ Piaget. p.162.

were something else: board game pieces being crackers, a box being a car, a bowl being a hat, and so on.

The appearance of symbolism, on the other hand, is the crucial point in all the interpretations of the ludic function. Why is it that play becomes symbolic, instead of continuing to be mere sensory-motor exercise or intellectual experiment, and why should the enjoyment of movement, or any activity for the fun of the activity, which constitute a kind of practical make-believe, be completed at a given moment by imaginative make-believe? The reason is that among the attributes of assimilation for assimilation's sake is that of distortion, and therefore to the extent to which it is dissociated from immediate accommodation it is a source of symbolic make-believe. This explains why there is symbolism as soon as we leave the sensory-motor level for that of representational thought.²⁶⁹

Piaget found that symbolic play runs rampant throughout this stage of development because the child becomes able to make-believe and therefore to distort the schema that they find in their explorations of the world. Representational thought is easily distorted by the imagination, and the child derives pleasure from this process. While the child's mental operations are still egocentric, sparse, and logically inadequate with regard to mental operations, the advent of representational thought allows them to form stable concepts and engage in magical thinking. This symbolism can be unconscious in addition to being conscious – dreams contain the same symbolic structure that make-believe games have. During this period, the child can remember and represent an object mentally even when it is not present, and they tend to pose the questions of “why?” and “how come?” This, says Piaget, is the stage when children want to understand everything.

Between the ages of seven and eleven, in the concrete operational stage, children are able to think logically, understand reversibility, and are no longer egocentric. They can hold conversations and can classify concepts much more readily, though hypothetical thinking is still

²⁶⁹ Piaget. p.162-163.

beyond them. It is in this stage that games with rules begin to appear – the most socialized ludic activity and one that will come to dominate ludic activity for the rest of their life, on through adulthood. The rules themselves may be handed down or spontaneous, but they always carry a socializing quality. Play in this stage will often involve inductive reasoning with concrete objects and concepts, but deductive reasoning will still be beyond them.

In the formal operational stage, beginning at age twelve, adolescents develop abstract thought and metacognition (thinking about thinking, becoming aware of one's awareness), and their play becomes almost entirely rules-driven on through adulthood. They are able to utilize symbols to think logically about abstract concepts, so the games that interest them can be vast systems of symbols and abstract concepts that interrelate in incredibly complex ways (though it should be noted that not all persons in all cultures reach formal operations, nor do all persons use formal operations in all aspects of their lives).²⁷⁰ Some aspects of earlier play forms persist, but they are always subordinate to the socialized aspect of rules.

In games with rules there is a subtle equilibrium between assimilation to the ego – the principle of all play – and social life. There is still sensory-motor or intellectual satisfaction, and there is also the chance of individual victory over others, but these satisfactions are as it were made 'legitimate' by the rules of the game, through which competition is controlled by a collective discipline, with a code of honor and fair play. This third and last type of play is therefore not inconsistent with the idea of assimilation of reality to the ego, while at the same time it reconciles this ludic assimilation with the demands of social reciprocity.²⁷¹

Further development occurs in games with more rules or more complex systems of rules. This is the dawn of strategic thinking, which requires a sophisticated faculty of reason and the ability to think in terms of hypotheticals – I will address this sort of play later in this chapter.

²⁷⁰ Arnett, Jeffrey. "3". *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (5th ed.). Pearson Education Inc. New York, NY. 2013. p. 91.

²⁷¹ Piaget. p.168.

6.1.3 Amusement and Unpredictability

One of the “rhetorics of play” Brian Sutton-Smith examines in *The Ambiguity of Play* is the “rhetoric of child play.” He notes that “the relationship between play and development has come to be so taken for granted that it is invoked almost any time an investigator finds an analogy between a play process and some other developmental process.”²⁷² Indeed, it is easy to get carried away and assume any perceived link between play activities and childhood development is one of importance and not merely a parallel process or epiphenomenon. Nonetheless, despite some healthy skepticism, many studies have found the link between learning and play to be a strong one.²⁷³ The intrinsic motivation of play (fun or amusement) combined with our natural propensity towards play (our instinct for it, almost a compulsion) make it an attractive target for those trying to understand how we learn. But it goes deeper than that. The very source of that fun is also one of our greatest teachers: unpredictability.

What is fun about unpredictability? Derived from the old French “à muser,” which means “to put into a stupid stare,” *amusement* is the emotional state that occurs when one experiences entertaining or humorous events or situations while one actively maintains the experience. The unpredictability of a situation draws us in. This is also sometimes experienced as tension, but the result is the same – our fixed attention up until a revelation or resolution sends us into a positive, high arousal emotion: relief and pleasure, often smiling and laughter. Amusement is best understood as an epistemological emotion because it occurs when one experiences a cognitive

²⁷² Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press. 1997. p.36.

²⁷³ Sutton-Smith. p.38-39.

shift from one knowledge structure about an object to another. When one hears the punchline of a joke, their understanding of the linguistic systems involved change in an unexpected way.²⁷⁴

The evolutionary purpose of amusement is not fully understood, nor is the precise mechanism that causes a given element to be considered more or less amusing than another to a particular individual. Yet the epistemological nature of amusement offers us clues – the cognitive shift from not-knowing to the moment of revelation where a dice toss resolves itself or the other player makes his or her move brings the pleasure of amusement. Developments resolve and change the state of play. The same kind of cognitive shifts can happen when we observe the play of others. Sitcom television, for example, is fun to watch because of the play of the people who made it – the writers surprise us with clever lines, the actors put on a performance, and the directors bring the production together creatively. Watching a sporting event is entertaining because of the constant stream of one resolution of tension after another: Will he catch the pass? Will she predict her opponent's moves? Will they take the risk? Will the risk pay off? The unpredictable elements of the play of the players entertains the spectators, who engage with the game through their own forms of play – shouting cheers and dressing up, for example. The discovery of new or changing elements in the ever-shifting playscape yields delight and fascination and keeps us mentally engaged in the activity. We want to predict and be vindicated or surprised – we want to experience the unpredictability and thereby learn something about the world. The fun derived from the unpredictability of play is the driving force that motivates the learning behaviors identified by Gee and Piaget.

²⁷⁴ Shiota, M. N., D. Keltner, and O. P. John. "Positive emotion dispositions differentially associated with Big Five personality and attachment style". *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. **1** (2): 61–71. 2006. [CiteSeerX 10.1.1.421.1730](https://doi.org/10.1.1.421.1730), [doi:10.1080/17439760500510833](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760500510833)

6.2 Play and Unpredictability

6.2.1 Unpredictable Elements in Different Forms of Play

The heart of fun is unpredictability and experimentation. Testing, teasing, exploring a system, whether that is a physical system (the ball during a ballgame), a linguistic system (a pun), or a conceptual system (a videogame or a game of “house”). Games all feature a feedback loop of inputs into the system and outputs back to the player who has imperfect knowledge of possible game-states. This creates an array of situations where the player is required to predict outcomes and act towards the one they deem most desirable. Sometimes this is as simple as a binary choice (trade my bishop for their knight?); sometimes it is as complex as budgeting resources for an infinite array of possible investments (as in a game of *Sid Meier’s Civilization*). The more one plays chess or *Civilization*, the better one becomes at making smart choices in those systems. The unpredictability becomes more predictable through probability, even if it is ultimately based on irreducibly unpredictable elements.

All play has an unpredictable element. This element affects the play activity in different ways, sometimes being an active process of maximizing one’s chances and other times being completely out of one’s control. Sometimes this element requires a player to react to new, unexpected developments and other times marks the conclusion of the play activity altogether. The unpredictable element in a play activity takes many forms. Using Roger Caillois’s classification of play activities from his book, *Man, Play, and Games*²⁷⁵ will illustrate the prevalence of unpredictability in all forms of play.

In many games, especially competitive ones, the unpredictable element is a test of skill. Caillois’s category of *agôn* play – competitive contests – are exemplified by sports. Ballgames –

²⁷⁵ Caillois, Roger. Trans. Meyer Barash. *Man, Play, and Games*. University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL. 2001.

including baseball or even fetch – revolve around attempts to throw or catch or strike a ball. Instant replay shows us the minutiae of play of this sort: Was the pitcher’s aim true? Was the catcher out of bounds before or after he had control over the ball? Races hinge on the performance of the runners with the big question looming over the entire activity: How fast can you go? Who will be fastest? The skillful movement of bodies in space create a field of unpredictable elements that determine the outcome of the game. The ultimate question of any *agôn* play activity– in the minds of the players and the spectators – is “who is superior?” The answer is revealed as the rituals of that particular form of contest play out.

The other side of *agôn* play is equally engaging: the minds and behavior of the other players. The unknown psychology of decision-maker – be it one’s opponent or one’s teammate – adds an infinite dimension of unpredictability to any activity, demanding of its participants a constant field of prediction based on both the state of the game (the other players’ current status in the game) and the personality and character of the participants. This hidden dimension of decision-making is best expressed by game theory, which will be explored more thoroughly later in this chapter.

Sometimes the unpredictable element is a design or prop that completely removes the outcome of the game from the players’ control. Caillois calls the sort of play found in games of chance *alea*, meaning “dice,” and with good reason – props are often used to add happenstance or destiny as a determiner of the result of the play activity. Straws of differing sizes create a simple lottery, while the advent of ticket-based lotteries create far more complicated systems of pure chance. Dice of various shapes and decks of various styles of cards ensure that the outcome is (at least partially) in the hands of fate, not the players. In games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and the many videogames with RPG design elements, the players have some control over which

dice are rolled and what values may be added to the result, but the dice toss itself remains entirely independent of their machinations. The story unfolds as it will.

While early play scholars – including Huizinga²⁷⁶ and Caillois – often disparage games of chance as being sources of social woe, contemporary scholars tend to be more neutral on the issue, pointing to the positive experiences many gamblers have. The fact that they represent a significantly larger flow of money than all other play activities put together is sometimes used to add importance to games of chance, though this is another fact Huizinga and Caillois point to in arguing games of chance are less pure than other forms of play. The very fact that the players have no or little control over the outcome of the game is a major draw – everyman has a chance to win big, or so the popular thought goes. The unpredictability of chance, including uncontrollable unpredictable elements in games that also involve some skill or creativity, is endlessly entertaining and therefore remain a wildly popular game mechanic in games of all kinds.

The third of Caillois's classifications of play activities – *mimicry* – may seem to lack the unpredictable element so obvious in *agôn* and *alea*, but a closer look reveals that it is essential to this form of play as well. Caillois explains this play pattern thusly,

All play presupposes the temporary acceptance, if not of an illusion (indeed this last word means nothing less than beginning a game: *in-lusio*), then at least of a closed, conventional, and, in certain respects, imaginary universe. Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Publishing. Mansfield Centre, CT. 2014. Originally published in 1938.

²⁷⁷ Caillois. p.17.

Caillois makes an important point here about play: it always involves a world of appearance that overlaps with the “real” world – see Chapter 5 for more on the irreality of play. The number on the top of the die *means* something beyond its value – it is a win or a loss or something else altogether. The runner crossing the line *means* that it is their victory. In the same way, mimicry *means* the feigning of an identity other than one’s own – it occurs in that same in-between world of play.

Mimicry is incessant invention. The rule of the game is unique: it consists in the actor’s fascinating the spectator, while avoiding an error that might lead the spectator to break the spell. The spectator must lend himself to the illusion without first challenging the décor, mask, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself.²⁷⁸

Thus, the unpredictability of mimicry is this behaving as-if, to self-present as something other than what one is. Because of the freedom of imagination this activity entails, it fascinates with its unpredictability. Anything *could be* anything else. In carnival, the costumes and masks are exaggerated and symbolic, each trying to catch the attention and bring the irreality of the event to manifestation. In an actor’s interpretation of Hamlet, the audience watches to see his or her portrayal of the character – the *as-if* is the source of unpredictability even when the character being portrayed is well-known, for every recital is different and we watch to see the infinite intricacies that make up a given performance. In children’s mimicry, too, we see the unpredictable element at its core. Whether imitating adults (with props such as miniature tools or dolls) or other (often seemingly random) objects such as trains or trees, the goal is not really deception, *per se*, but rather self-presentation. This creative aspect comes from the imagination and understanding (sometimes misunderstanding) of the child and is presented as a performance (in the same *as-if* vein that *agôn* contests or portraying Hamlet can be performances).

²⁷⁸ Caillois. p.23.

Finally, Caillois's last pattern of play is *ilinx* (meaning "whirlpool" in Greek), and here, too, we find unpredictability as its main attractor. Caillois writes,

The last kind of game includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness.²⁷⁹

The behavior of a dog who, invigorated by the return of her master, runs laps around the room or the screams of riders on a roller coaster are examples of this pattern of play described by Caillois. The goal is disorientation and excitement, derived from controlled physiological distress. The sensory experience is where the unpredictability of *ilinx* can be found – novel and extreme sensory inputs, fast and varied, bring the pleasure-fear reaction common to play activities of this kind.

Caillois's classifications of play activities cover a broad swath of them and, while unpredictability is not included in his analysis, it should be clear now that it is present in every instance of play in some form. I have kept my examples thus far to simple examples, but looking to more modern examples of play activities such as modern board games and videogames reveals the extent to which unpredictability is utilized in game design. *Gloomhaven*²⁸⁰ – a Euro-inspired tactical RPG board game – uses several decks of specialized cards (in addition to plastic miniatures, cardboard pawns, a scenario book that functions as a gameboard, a city map with stickers to mark progress, and a variety of cardboard chits in various shapes and sizes) to randomize gameplay. Each player has two decks (one for their abilities and one for randomly generating modifiers), each enemy type has a deck for randomly generating their actions (and a shared deck for randomly generating modifiers), and there are decks for items that may be

²⁷⁹ Caillois. p.23.

²⁸⁰ *Gloomhaven*. Cephalofair Games. 2018.

purchased, for random “city events” that add story elements to gameplay, and more. All these decks serve to make each session of *Gloomhaven* different – players choose to use different abilities in different situations, the modifier decks randomize the effectiveness of said abilities, the enemies behave differently according to their action deck, etc. The entire affair is an exercise in resource management and risk assessment, and it is wildly fun.

6.2.2 Tension in Jokes, Storytelling

Tension – the sense of straining or building up of pressure – is evidence of unpredictability and its release or resolution is met with pleasure and satisfaction, and sometimes surprise. Character conflicts, opposing forces, ever-rising stakes, risky decisions, daunting obstacles, time limits, confounding mysteries – good storytelling uses tension to hold the audience’s attention and to reward them with its resolution. It makes us care about characters and settings. But tension is not limited to novels or movies – jokes rely on it as well, but they use tension to specifically evoke amusement.

Jokes are a form of play that is especially fun (funny), but it can be difficult to see how a joke has the oscillation that engenders fun, since it has no physicality to wiggle (to-and-fro). The key is to understand the source of fun as a *conceptual* oscillation that occurs at the punchline – a double meaning, a homonym, an unexpected resolution of the joke’s setup. The moment when the humor of the joke is revealed, an epistemological shift in their knowledge-state occurs in the mind(s) of the audience where the setup is resolved in a way that delights us with its surprising result. The tension is resolved in a way that surprises and delights. In fact, in some cases the revelation of the joke’s punchline *is* accentuated by a physicality in the form of a playful strike – slapstick like the smacks and pokes of the Three Stooges, for example.

Having covered the ways unpredictable play teaches us how to interact with the world, we can now turn to the topic of unpredictability itself. Unpredictability is a complicated concept that actually refers to many related but distinct ideas – randomness, chance, luck, instability, uncertainty, indeterminacy. It will be helpful to unpack those ideas and assess how they relate to play.

6.2.3 Randomness, Chance, and Indeterminism

In play, unpredictability invites prediction, even when the probabilities are unknown (or unknowable). As play unfolds, the players are constantly reevaluating conditions within the game's system(s). Unpredictability, chance, and randomness are often used interchangeably in conversation, and they resist comprehensive classification. Generally, randomness is assigned to the *product* of an event while chance is a feature of *process*: “rather than being entirely determined by features of the outcome to which the surface grammar of chance ascriptions assigns the chance... Whether or not an event happens by chance is a feature of the process that produced it, not the event itself.”²⁸¹ In this usage, unpredictability is best understood to be a classification of the epistemic conditions of an event, whether the event is truly random (i.e., it happens for no reason or one outcome results when others were just as possible) or merely beyond one's powers of prediction (i.e., it is unpredictable in its complexity or has hidden features which mask its future behavior). In science, we encounter events which are truly probabilistic, not just unpredictable in an epistemic sense (radioactive decay and quantum mechanics being two commonly cited examples).

²⁸¹ Eagle, Antony, "Chance versus Randomness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/chance-randomness/> First published 8/18/2010; substantive revision 2/8/2018. Retrieved 10/13/2021.

Finally, it is worth considering these terms in relation to indeterminism. There are philosophers who have argued that unpredictability and indeterminism are synonymous, while others have attempted to classify them as different but related concepts. Classical indeterminism “occurs when the state of the system at one time does not uniquely fix the state the system will be in at some future time.”²⁸² Yet predictability might be distinguished from determinism in its epistemic nature – the former concerns what is knowable in theory while the latter concerns causation (which may or may not be knowable). Below I examine a proposed classificatory system regarding unpredictability in play formulated by Mark R. Johnson in *The Unpredictability of Play*, which applies the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze to the epistemic structures of gameplay.

6.3 A History of Unpredictable Games

Johnson notes that unpredictability can mean a number of things – randomness, luck, chance, instability, uncertainty, indeterminacy – and he seeks to organize these various notions into a set classificatory system. At their heart, all of these words refer to an “action which can yield multiple outcomes for identical inputs, and... the ‘selected’ outcome from the possibility space of potential outcomes cannot be foreseen.”²⁸³ The word “selected” here conceals a complicated set of questions, as it can describe a number of notoriously complex situations, but this nonetheless provides a pretty solid definition from which he can begin his work.

Johnson provides a brief history of unpredictability in gameplay, which describes a gradual shift from a divinely-ordained process focused on outcomes to a predictive and mathematical process focused on the systems behind those outcomes. Before the Enlightenment,

²⁸³ Johnson, Mark J. *The Unpredictability of Gameplay*. Bloomsbury Academic. New York, NY. 2019. p.2.

unpredictability simply meant that mortals did not know the outcome, but the gods did, and victory in an unpredictable contest simply revealed what the gods already knew – the winner was fated to win. This explains the close connection between games of chance and oracular divination practices, which “read” the future in something unpredictable (palm lines, tea leaves, entrails, etc.). This mode of unpredictable gameplay was mainly concerned with the outcome of the game, as the will of the heavens was revealed, but Johnson notes three societal developments (among many others) primarily responsible for a shift away from the spiritual and towards the arithmetic: “the beginnings of a deeper mathematical understanding of ludic unpredictability, the global emergence of casinos and the formalization of gambling games, and the development of game theory as a scholarly discipline.”²⁸⁴

The Enlightenment brought about the fundamental realization that events which are yet to come may be predicted because they occur in probabilistic distributions. Thinkers like Blaise Pascal, Pierre de Fermat, and Antoine Gombaud laid out the foundations of probability theory in 1654 and Gottfried Leibniz later brought those insights into the ludic realm as a microcosm of the uncertainty inherent in all human activity.²⁸⁵ Following that, the rise of casinos led to the institutionalization of gambling in the seventeenth century, which removed the religious context present in ancient games of chance (although superstition remained). Gambling in Europe therefore became the site of “*scientific*, rather than sacred, dramas.”²⁸⁶ Thinking about mathematics, statistics, and finance became more highly valued and gambling became an important site of cultural meaning. This marked a change in who engaged with unpredictability, how they did so, and why they did so.

²⁸⁴ Johnson. p.5.

²⁸⁵ Johnson. p.6.

²⁸⁶ Reith, Gerda. *The Age of Chance*. Routledge. London, UK. 1999. p.29.

Lastly, Johnson identifies the emergence of game theory as a scholarly pursuit in the twentieth century as the zenith of this historical movement. Thanks to the work of mathematicians like John von Neumann, “almost anything within the natural or social world might be modelled as a game-like system” where unpredictability creates a possibility space “through which supposedly rational choices can be made to secure the best outcomes, no matter the outcomes of unpredictable processes (whether mechanical unpredictability or through the uncertain actions of other actors).”²⁸⁷ Here, the strategic value of the study of the cooperation or competition between actors became apparent in the context of the Cold War. This marks an historical shift from players being concerned primarily with the outcomes of particular games (played at a particular time and place with its particular players) to an epoch where players are primarily concerned with mastering the systems which produce those outcomes – over possibly hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of iterations, “seeking to identify commonalities, numerical underpinnings, and optimal decisions.”²⁸⁸

Johnson categorizes unpredictability in games into four types, differentiated by the location in the structure of gameplay they occupy. He calls unpredictable initial conditions of gameplay (such as shuffled cards) ‘randomness.’ When the unpredictable element occurs during the course of ongoing play, he calls it ‘chance.’ And when the unpredictable element occurs at the conclusion of gameplay, as in a lottery, he names it ‘luck.’ Finally, unpredictability that is unintended or accidental is called ‘instability’ – this includes exploits and glitches. In order to examine the unpredictability of gameplay and explore the various locations in gameplay where that unpredictability operates, Johnson turns to the philosopher of nonrepresentation, affect, and movement, Gilles Deleuze.

²⁸⁷ Johnson. p.7.

²⁸⁸ Johnson. p.8.

6.3.1 A Deleuzean Look at Randomness in Play

Johnson observes that, while his is not the first work to apply Deleuzean thought to games, his is the first to focus on the aspect of gameplay that is most suited for Deleuzean thought – the consideration of unpredictability. On games of randomness (where the unpredictable element is located prior to the beginning of the playthrough), for example, Johnson applies Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizomatic and arborescent systems to describe the ways the initial, randomized conditions of gameplay reverberate throughout a given instance of play. The game he uses for this example is *Sid Meier’s Civilization* series, a turn-based nation-building strategy game that models the rise and clash of various civilizations over many centuries. The world map is randomly generated at the beginning of each new game (a differentiating process), and the players (each controlling a nation) begin the game in random spots on the map. These initial conditions greatly influence the strategy a player will use to grow their civilization, and Johnson uses the model of a rhizome to explain how these ‘active elements’ affect the player’s experience of the game.

Johnson notes that “...games of randomness possess points of **arborescence** which flow from each generated initial condition of play, all situated within the broader **rhizomatic** nature of the possibility space denoted by randomness.”²⁸⁹ Johnson calls these ‘active elements,’ actualized variables which cause gameplay to be changed in the context of other actualized variables in the initial conditions of play. Thus, future gameplay is built upon these active elements.

One possible tree of gameplay decisions is then played out in one instance of gameplay, but the roots from which that tree originates are only one in a vast

²⁸⁹ Johnson. p.43.

forest of potential roots for the same game – all the other active elements that might have appeared in that context instead.²⁹⁰

The main idea Johnson presents here is that these tree roots – distinguished by their random active elements – are vast and varied, and each will only be explored once. In this way, many games (especially videogames) offer a nearly infinite play-space with many systems of randomness all interrelating in vastly complex ways, providing the player with a forest of possible routes. As Deleuze and Guattari say, trees have rhizome lines, and the rhizome has points of arborescence.

The construction of the initial conditions of a game is rife with the distribution of active and null elements, and then the active portion of those elements give rise to new sequences of gameplay. Randomness is rhizomatic (in its selection and orientation of different elements), but each rhizome selected only becomes the foundation of future gameplay *if it matters*. If a rhizome matters and has a direct impact on gameplay, it is consequently of the order of repetition; if it does not matter and gameplay would be no different had another rhizome been selected then it is of the order of generality.²⁹¹

With these infinite tree roots, it is expected that many will have null elements which will have no meaningful effect on the player's selected course – this is part of the fun of exploring a given root. Johnson notes that, in failing to become repetition, a null random element cannot be the point from which new arborescence begins, as a sequence of gameplay influenced or determined by that gameplay element. A card in one's hand that does not help make a winning hand cannot actively change the gameplay of that instance of play if none of the players ever elect to use the uninteresting card.

Null and active elements are therefore quite clearly differentiated (not alike in form), for all active elements have distinctive qualities and all null effects have the same effect; in turn, null elements are undifferentiated in effect although certainly still differentiated in their actual manifestation (an irrelevant island in *Sid Meier's Civilization* looks unlike an irrelevant mountain, but if neither factor into any gameplay decisions, they serve the same lack of purpose), while active

²⁹⁰ Johnson. p.43.

²⁹¹ Johnson. p.43.

elements are always differentiated in their effect and differentiated in their manifestation.²⁹²

Thus, active and null elements – decided before the first round of the game – go on to influence the branching rhizomatic path the player takes. Deserts are particularly unhelpful early on in *Civilization* games, until the combustion engine is discovered and oil resources are revealed on the map. This precious resource was always there, right from the beginning, but was hidden until a civilization developed advanced technology through their scientific progression. This element – determined from the beginning – changes from a null element (the unhelpful desert tile) into a very active element (providing the highly sought-after oil resource), thus influencing the course of the game.

In instances of chance – unpredictability during ongoing gameplay – moments of uncertainty are distributed throughout a game while in instances of luck – unpredictability of the eventual outcomes of an instance of play – the player cannot influence its resolution. The former – chance – is the most common location for unpredictable game elements. Many games feature a chance of success for certain in-game actions, with that chance being influenced by player choices and strategies. But ultimately it is in the hands of the RNG – the random number generator – whether the action is successful or not. It is perhaps best equated to the roll of a die – the original RNG. The latter type of unpredictable element – luck – exists as lines of arborescence that stem from unpredictability in a game and endures until the end of the playthrough. Both chance elements and luck elements help level the playing field between players of varying skill levels and keep the game interesting even after the player has mastered its systems. They can also be sources of frustration, but as Gee discovered in *What Video Games*

²⁹² Johnson. p.43-44.

Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy, this frustration only sometimes ruins the drive to continue play. Often, it only encourages further attempts until mastery is achieved.

6.3.2 Repetition and Difference in Unpredictable Games

These unpredictable elements in games have led to a number of socially constructed and culturally transmitted behaviors meant to get the most out of a game. “Save scumming” and “grinding” are only two examples of this kind of meaning-making that have arisen out of the unpredictability of videogame systems.

‘Save scumming’ entails backing up one’s character... and then redoing that save if or when one’s character perishes [or another failure state results]. This can be used in two ways: to play until one’s death or until a critically difficult part of the game has arisen, and then to reload to a previous point and play through that section of the game again, which will be different on the second attempt due to the game’s unpredictability; or to deliberately play the same section of a game repeatably, even if it is not especially or at all challenging, until an unusually positive (as opposed to simply ‘not fatal’) permutation is created, whose benefits the player accepts before continuing the rest of the play of the game (although they might return to such a practice once or many times in the future).²⁹³

By replaying a game from a save point over and over, the player increases their chance of success and further develops their mastery (literacy) of the game. “With a finite set of possibilities, and the time to try every possibility, the (or a) correct possibility will eventually be located.”²⁹⁴ This is another form of bricolage or “tinkering” that players experiment with to achieve certain things with a given game’s systems. While it is sometimes frowned upon as a substitute for “actual” skill, some games are designed with save scumming in mind, turning this usually metagame practice into another game mechanic embedded in the game’s semiotic domain.

²⁹³ Johnson. p.207.

²⁹⁴ Johnson. p.208.

Grinding is another type of metagame practice where in-game actions are repeated again and again in anticipation of a cumulative or rare or unusual result.

This might be because the player has to collect a large number of a given item, for example, and must perform the same item-giving in-game act repeatably until enough of those items are acquired; or it might involve performing an action that offers only a small chance of the desired outcome over and over until the game's chance systems select the outcome the player wants... grinding involves the pursuit of a single difference and a single repetition of a sort known in advance, and primarily involves the deliberate and continuing recreation of generality until the game's system offers the desired outcome.²⁹⁵

Like save scumming, grinding is sometimes used as a game mechanic to draw out the replayability of a game. By forcing or encouraging the player to grind for various rewards, the game can demand more playtime from the player. The Deleuzean concept at play in both save scumming and grinding is the repetition which produces difference, not the same. The metagame act of save scumming or grinding shapes the player's experience of the game towards differentiating multiple iterations of play, teasing out the desired results from the playspace provided by the game.

Having looked at both learning in play and unpredictability in play, we can now turn to the field of game theory, which is the ultimate form of the third type of play identified by Piaget: games with rules. While both sensorimotor and symbolic games still appear after adolescence, adulthood is dominated by this game form by a large margin. Game theory is the mathematical modeling of the logic of games with rules and reflects the optimal strategy of a player in a given game state. Animals and children do not appear in this field, as it reflects gameplaying reason of the highest order. It seeks to master unpredictable situations by understanding the systems behind those possible outcomes. Examining game theory will help demonstrate the incredibly complex ways reason addresses uncertainty in play and in general.

²⁹⁵ Johnson. p.170-171.

6.4 Play and Strategy

6.4.1 Decision Theory as an Epistemic View of Games

Reason is involved in play in another way – maximizing one’s utility in a game. This optimizing behavior in play comes about in the adult period of life, after socialized games controlled by rules have replaced the sensory-motor practice games and simple symbolic games that typify childhood.²⁹⁶ The interactions within these rules-based games are mapped out mathematically in the field of game theory. This branch of decision theory studies the way in which economic agents make interacting choices, producing outcomes according to their preferences (utilities), with the possibility of unintended outcomes occurring. Game theory – in its current form used by biologists, economists, social scientists, and more – was first given a general mathematical formulation by Oskar Morgenstern and John von Neuman in 1944, but it was further developed during the Cold War by both the USA and the USSR to better predict each other’s actions and strategies.

Although it was rendered systematically in 1944, the fundamental insights of what would be called game theory can be found in philosophy going back to the times of the ancients. In both Plato’s *Laches* and *Symposium*, Socrates muses on the Battle of Delium – some modern thinkers have taken (probably anachronistically) to involve game-theoretical circumstances – the reasoning behind the strategy is the main focus of these examples. Consider a warrior at the frontlines, preparing to repulse an enemy attack with his fellow soldiers. He might think that if the defense is probably going to be successful, then it is unlikely that his own efforts will be needed to win the day. But if he stays at the frontlines and fights, there is a risk of his being wounded or even killed. On the other hand, if the enemy is likely to win this battle, then the

²⁹⁶ Piaget. p.145.

soldier's chances of death or injury are even higher and he will be wounded or killed pointlessly since their line will be overwhelmed anyway. Thus, based on this reasoning, the soldier's best course of action is to run away from the battle regardless of which side is going to win. However, if all the warriors followed this line of reasoning (as they all apparently ought to, since they're all in the same situation), then they will definitely lose the battle because they would all run away. Why would any of them stay and fight? The more the warriors fear that this fight will be lost, the greater their incentive to get out of harm's way. And the greater the warriors' belief that the battle will be won without the need of any single soldier's contributions, the less reason they all have to stay and fight. Furthermore, if every soldier *anticipates* his fellow men-at-arms arriving at this conclusion, they will all will quickly reason themselves into a panic. Their (no doubt horrified) commander will have to deal with his forces being routed before the enemy has even attacked their position.

This way of analyzing the predictable aspects of rational decision-making can be found throughout history. The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés landed in Aztec-controlled Mexico with a small force who no doubt feared their ability to successfully defend against their far more numerous foes. Cortés did something seemingly insane – he had his ships burned. This eliminated the chance that his troops might reason their way into a retreat. Now that retreat was physically impossible, the Spanish soldiers had no better course of action than to stand and fight as well as they possibly could. Even better (at least from Cortés's point of view) his action had an equal and opposite reaction from the Aztecs. He burned his ships in plain view of his opponents, making sure the Aztecs could see what he had done. Surely, the Aztecs must have reasoned that any leader who was so confident he intentionally destroyed his own ability to retreat if the battle turned south must have good reasons for such an extreme confidence.

Attacking an opponent who is apparently sure that he can't lose would be supremely unwise. Thus, the Aztecs retreated into the hills, and Cortés secured the easiest victory possible.

Centuries before there was an explicit name for it, the study of this kind of reasoning – which governs the interrelationships between strategic interactions, incentives, and outcomes – has been fundamental to political philosophy. Social scientists and philosophers share the need to represent and systematically model what they think agents normatively *ought to* do. Additionally, they need to be able to model what agents often *actually* do in this sort of interactive situation. One of the most important developments in game theory was undoubtedly the work of John Nash – a Nobel Laureate mathematician who, in 1950, extended and generalized the work first pioneered by Morgenstern and von Neumann. The Nash equilibrium is a combination of beliefs about probabilities over strategies and the choices of the other player(s), best explicated in the so-called Prisoners' Dilemma.

6.4.2 Predicting Psychology in the Prisoner's Dilemma

Suppose that the authorities have arrested two criminals that they know committed a major crime together – **Prisoner One** and **Prisoner Two**. The authorities lack enough admissible evidence for a jury to convict them of the major crime, but they do have enough evidence to send each prisoner away for a minor crime for two years. So, the authorities make an offer to each prisoner: "If you will confess to the major crime, implicating the other prisoner, and the other prisoner does not *also* confess, then you will go free and the other will be sentenced to three years of prison. If you both confess, you'll each get two years. If neither of you confesses, then you'll each get one year for the minor crime." This situation is neatly summarized in Table 3, below. Paradoxically, according to Nash's equilibrium, both criminals have an incentive to confess, regardless of the choice the other makes.

Table 3: A visualization of the Prisoners' Dilemma

	Prisoner Two stays silent (cooperates)	Prisoner Two betrays Prisoner One (confesses)
Prisoner One stays silent (cooperates)	Both serve 1 year	Prisoner One serves 3 years while Prisoner Two goes free
Prisoner One betrays Prisoner Two (confesses)	Prisoner One goes free while Prisoner Two serves 3 years	Both serve 2 years

From Prisoner One's point of view, if Prisoner Two remains silent, then Prisoner One can either cooperate with Prisoner Two (by not confessing) and do a year in jail, or confess (betray) and go free. Obviously, she would be better off betraying Prisoner Two in this case. On the other hand, if Prisoner Two confesses and testifies against Prisoner One, then Prisoner One's choice becomes either to remain silent and do three years or talk and do two years in jail. Again, obviously, she would prefer to do the two years over three.

In both cases, whether Prisoner Two co-operates with Prisoner One or defects to the authorities, Prisoner One will be better off if she herself confesses. Now, since Prisoner Two faces the exact same set of choices he will also always be better off confessing as well. The paradox of the prisoner's dilemma is this: both criminals can minimize their total jail time if they both co-operate ($1+1=2$ years total), but the incentives that they each face separately might drive them each to confess and end up doing the maximum total jail time between the two of them ($2+2=4$ years total). This is the best option a player can make, taking into account the other prisoner's decision and where a change in a prisoner's decision will only lead to a worse result if the other prisoner sticks to their strategy. This is the Nash equilibrium for the prisoner's dilemma – the optimal outcome is where no player has an incentive to deviate from their chosen strategy after considering their opponent's choice. The prisoners can achieve their desired outcomes by

not deviating from their initial strategies. The Nash equilibrium can thusly find application in a wide range of disciplines, from the social sciences to economics.

But this is where the unpredictable-epistemic element enters the picture – knowing the other prisoner personally might help a prisoner guess what choice they will actually make. Are they the loyal kind of person? Are they the type to throw you under the bus? These questions of character seem to complicate the Nash equilibrium of the prisoner’s dilemma by adding a psychological layer into the mix. In other words, it is possible that one or both of the prisoners will defy cold logic (either willingly or because their reasoning is deficient) and choose a nonoptimal strategy. Yet, looked at another way, this psychological addition doesn’t really alter the picture painted by game theory – as American philosopher Robert Stalnaker explains, it is just another variable with expected behavior and unpredictable results.

There is no special concept of rationality for decision making in a situation where the outcomes depend on the actions of more than one agent. The acts of other agents are, like chance events, natural disasters and acts of God, just facts about an uncertain world that agents have beliefs and degrees of belief about. The utilities of other agents are relevant to an agent only as information that, together with beliefs about the rationality of those agents, helps to predict their actions.²⁹⁷

Stalnaker’s point here is that one’s beliefs about other players can be folded into the larger equation the same way any unpredictable factor can. How well you know the other player might narrow the range of unpredictability in regards to their decision-making psychology, but the same is true of all unpredictable elements: you might know that you are more likely to roll a 7 with two six-sided dice than a 12, and that knowledge informs your own strategizing. In this way, even the infinitely complex element of a person’s psychology can be reduced to mathematical terms in game theory. The practical value of this is, as noted before, enormous.

²⁹⁷ Stalnaker, Robert. “Knowledge, Belief and Counterfactual Reasoning in Games.” *Economics and Philosophy*, vol.12. 1996. p.136.

6.4.3 Game Theory Concepts

So, what does game theory provide players? Game theory features many concepts that explain how players form optimal strategies. Game theorists call any interactive situation involving a group of players (self-interested agents) a “game,” the structure of which forms an interdependent decision problem. In addition to the players and their preferences of possible outcomes, a game will involve feasible options, called “actions” or “strategies.” Games can have many structural properties – they can occur as a single-shot or a multi-stage decision problem, they can involve players moving simultaneously or stochastically, and they can involve degrees of “common knowledge” (each player knows the rules and the benefits or drawbacks of a given move, and they are aware that all the other players know the rules and utility functions as well). The “utility function” describes the satisfaction a player gets from owning, using, or doing something. This allows players to choose between available options.

For a player to make rational choices – inside or outside of a game context – they must select, based on the information they have and the beliefs they hold, the best (i.e., optimal) action. Often, these decisions hinge on the choices made by the other players involved in the scenario (as well as the objective state of the game). A player must interact with other players who all try to choose their own best course of action based on their own beliefs and information. There are several types of information that players may have access to in a game-based decision process. For instance, a player may have *perfect* or *imperfect information* (which cards may have been dealt); *complete* or *incomplete information* about the structure of the game (what the payoffs are for given actions); *strategic information* (what other players might do to optimize their play); and *higher-order information* (knowing what the other players are thinking). All of these forms of information determine the optimal strategy for a player in a given game situation – hence, “*epistemic* game theory.” In order to play well, players must exercise their faculty of

reason to determine their strategies based on the knowledge they have of the state of the game and its participants.

There are structural classifications that game theorists use to categorize games into useful groups. A sequential game has “perfect information” if each player, when making any decision, is perfectly informed of all the events that have occurred previously. Chess, tic-tac-toe, checkers, and go are examples of games with perfect information because each player can see all the pieces on the board at all times and knows how they operate (move around the board, form rows, etc.). In simultaneous games with “imperfect information,” players have different levels of knowledge available to make decisions – a used car salesman has more information about the quality of a car than the buyer because they are more familiar with it. Imperfect information occurs when decisions are made simultaneously, when players need to balance all possible outcomes.

This brief introduction to game theory barely scratches the surface of the depth of thought the field offers, but it should suffice to show how deeply knowledge and reason are involved in play activities. Knowledge here includes not only practical knowledge (common knowledge about the game process) but also situational knowledge (what cards my opponent may have in her hand). As the game proceeds, the state of the game pivots around the acquisition of this knowledge and the predictive capabilities of the players involved. Just as with storytelling and jokes, tension is built up over the unpredictability of play and is released with a revelation – the dice turn up a number, the hand is played, the bluffs are revealed.

6.5 Conclusions on Reason and Play

We have seen three of the many ways play involves reason: learning, unpredictability, and strategy. Although there could be other topics relating play and the faculty of reason, discussing these three suffices to demonstrate the rich relationship between them. We learn

through play as children, experimenting with sensory-motor activities just for the pleasure of being their cause and manipulating symbols in the schema we construct to understand the world. As we age, games with rules come to largely replace those earlier forms of play. In all three of these forms of play, unpredictability provides both the motive force behind and the delight of these games. From ancient divination practices to modern probabilistic systems, unpredictability is at the heart of the vast majority of play activities. It can come from the tension in jokes and storytelling, the thrill of the roll of the die, or the infinite variety of another player's psychology. Optimizing one's play strategy is the prime activity of higher-order play, as described in game theory – literacy in a game system acquired by experimentation and 'tinkering' with gamer systems the way a mechanic tinkers with an engine. From the very beginning of life to the highest-order of human thought, play and reason are intertwined in a profound way.

CHAPTER 7. *PATHOS* – THE AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF PLAY

“Play is foundational for bonding relationships and fostering tolerance. It’s where we learn to trust and where we learn about the rules of the game. Play increases creativity and resilience, and it’s all about the generation of diversity—diversity of interactions, diversity of behaviors, diversity of connections.” – Isabel Behncke

In the course of my research, I found that the aesthetic dimension of play and the ethical dimension of play are deeply intertwined and so I have combined both topics into a single chapter to try and elucidate their relationship to each other and to the topic of play. Both the philosophy of art and moral philosophy involve axiology, which studies value judgements (of sentiment or taste for art, of cultural traditions or rules-following for ethics). To say of an instance of play that it was “a good game,” one is making a value judgement on the event – the play event itself was successful on both a moral and aesthetic level. The rules of the game were followed, as were the unwritten rules of sportsmanship that every game has in some form or another, and as a result the form of the game was fully realized. Thus, one might say there was beauty in how the game was played by the players – the skillful moves and strategies were in good form. These judgements are often accompanied by visceral emotional responses – good games make us (players and/or the audience) *feel* good, beyond the intellectual acknowledgment of the game’s worth. And bad games and bad game-players sometimes leave us with a feeling of anger or disgust. I will argue in this chapter that both the rules themselves and the execution of an instance of gameplay can be objects of beauty and play activities often carry with them a sense of moral worth.

The first section of this chapter is concerned with play and aesthetics, including the topics of beauty and artistic creation. I will begin this chapter with the origins of the philosophy of aesthetics from ancient times up to the Romantic era. Then, I will discuss how artists sometimes

use play in the creation of their artworks. The next subsection is about the debate on whether games, especially sophisticated computer games, can ever be considered true art. I will finish this first section with a look at how play itself has aesthetic potential and how the play of a game itself can be an object of beauty (or horror or any other possible aesthetic).

In the second section, I look at the ethical dimension of play. I explore a useful analogy between being a player of a game and being a citizen of a state. Next, I look at the dichotomy of sportsmanship and gamesmanship, two attitudes that govern how a player behaves during the course of a game. I end this section with an analysis of the ethical value of play – how play can contribute to the moral development of youth and what kinds of lessons we learn when we play, especially in organized sports.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I am primarily concerned with how some philosophers provide an aesthetic answer to the ethical question, “what ought one do?” I look at two process philosophers, Dewey and Whitehead, who both argue that Kant ignores the aesthetic element of moral experience. Both of them turn towards aesthetics to develop general descriptive ethics, rather than Kant’s calculative rationality for guiding our behavior. Then I turn to Nietzsche as another philosopher who tackles the ethical question with an aesthetic answer – in his case, he is concerned with defeating nihilism without the objective morality provided by belief in God, and he turns to aesthetics to guide a new valuation of all values. I then look at how the structure of interactivity of play provides players with a level of agency that affords gamemakers with the means to create second-person art – the players’ agency within the playworld allows for stories and lessons that involve the player directly. This allows for games that ask ethical questions of the player and puts them into a position to reflect on ethical issues – rather than seeing them answered by a character in a story, it is the players themselves who must

reflect on the scenario and make the decision. I finish this section with a look at another, more practical connection between aesthetics and ethics – how putting on a theatre production teaches incarcerated persons general experience with ethical skills and ultimately leads to a higher moral intelligence. Where some didactic games with ethical dimensions teach something to the audience, in this case it is the playmakers themselves who learn good moral behavior through their playmaking.

7.1 The Aesthetics of Play

7.1.1 The Origin of the Study of Aesthetics

Much has been written about the relationship between art and play. To fully explicate the relationship between aesthetics and play, it is important to clarify what we are talking about when we talk about aesthetics. The philosophy of art or aesthetics is a field of philosophy concerned with the concepts of beauty, taste, and art. Beauty is a positive aesthetic value while its negative counterpart is ugliness. Beauty is commonly held to be a fundamental concept of human understanding, alongside truth and goodness – this association goes all the way back to the Platonic tradition of ancient Athens. Plato believed that every material thing we encounter in the world is an imperfect echo or reflection of a timeless, absolute and unchangeable Idea or Form. Every chair is considered a chair because of its resemblance of the Idea or Form of “chair;” in this way, every object can be judged to be either closer to or further from this ideal chair Form. For Plato, beauty is the Idea or Form above all others, and he holds that Beauty is aligned with Truth and with the Good. His student Aristotle agrees that “virtue aims at the beautiful.”²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Catholic philosophers in the Middle Ages like Thomas Aquinas held beauty to be one of the transcendental attributes of being itself.²⁹⁹ In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas suggests that the three conditions of beauty are: *integritas* (wholeness), *consonantia* (proportion and harmony), and *claritas* (the form of a thing made apparent to the mind by a radiance or clarity).³⁰⁰ The Renaissance saw art theory rediscover the Greeks and thus readopt the “classical ideal.” This connection between the (morally) good and the beautiful can be traced back through Western history, but it is not unique to the Western tradition. Like the Greeks, many Eastern philosophers identified goodness with beauty. Confucius considered the greatest beauty to be a virtuous personality. In his philosophy, “a neighborhood with a *ren* man in it is a beautiful neighborhood.”³⁰¹ “*Ren*” is a virtue meaning the good quality of a virtuous human when being altruistic. His student, Mencius, considered “complete truthfulness” to be beauty.³⁰² The Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi wrote that “When one has strenuously implemented goodness until it is filled to completion and has accumulated truth, then the beauty will reside within it and will not depend on externals.”³⁰³

Modern aesthetics truly began in the Age of Reason with Immanuel Kant, whose “disinterested” theory of art influenced nearly every philosopher who followed him. Kant integrated his aesthetic theory into his philosophy as a whole, fitting his theory of beauty and art into his larger, comprehensive philosophical system. In the chapter “Analytic of the Beautiful” in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, he writes that beauty is not a property of a natural phenomenon or

²⁹⁹ Eco, Umberto. *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 1988. p.98.

³⁰⁰ McNamara, Denis Robert. *Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy*. Hillenbrand Books. Mundelein, IL. 2009. pp.24–28.

³⁰¹ Chang, Chi-yun. *Confucianism: A Modern Interpretation (2012 Edition)*. World Scientific Publishing Company. Singapore. 2013. p.213.

³⁰² Tang, Yijie. *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture*. Springer Berlin Heidelberg. 2015. p.242.

³⁰³ Tang. p.242.

work of art, but rather that beauty is found in the consciousness of the pleasure that accompanies the “free play” between the imagination and understanding. Kant argues that beauty is subjective; we judge an object to be beautiful when it shows “purposiveness” – that is, when its form is fitted for a purpose or designed according to a principle.³⁰⁴ He distinguishes “free beauty” from “merely dependent beauty;” free beauty “presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be” while merely dependent beauty “does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance therewith.”³⁰⁵

Kant’s theory of pure beauty has four elements: its freedom from concepts, its objectivity, its obligatoriness, and the “disinterest” of the beholder. By “freedom from concepts,” Kant means pure beauty is free from “ends” or “purpose;” that is, free from what our cognitive powers of understanding and imagination judge applies to a given object. When no definite concept is involved, these two cognitive powers are in free play and it is then that one experiences pure beauty. Because everyone who can make judgments shares these cognitive powers in common, there is also objectivity and universality in the judgment. According to Kant, the obligatoriness of such judgements of pure beauty come from their selflessness; in the 18th century this was called “disinterest.” The disinterestedness comes about because we are not satisfied sensuously by pure beauty, and we aren’t made to want to possess the object. The pure beauty pleases us intellectually in a distinctive way – it simply holds our attention. This makes perceiving pure beauty an end in itself – it is not a means to any further end and is simply enjoyed for its own sake. Morality requires that one rise above oneself; this is how an exercise in “disinterested” attention becomes obligatory. Judgments of pure beauty are selfless; this brings

³⁰⁴ Kennick, William Elmer (1979). *Art and Philosophy: Readings in Aesthetics*; 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press. p.482–483. [ISBN 0312053916](#).

³⁰⁵ Kennick. p.517.

one into the moral point of view. Thus, Kant says that “Beauty is a symbol of Morality” and that “the enjoyment of nature is the mark of a good soul.” The shared enjoyment of the pure beauty found in a waterfall shows that there is harmony between all of us, and between us and the world.

In the late 18th century, Schiller, alongside Kant, became the popular view of art and play, the emphasis being on the pair of concepts as related or even identical. Gadamer summarizes Kant’s influential line of thought thusly:

Kant characterized the disinterested, non-purposive, and nonconceptual quality of delight in the beautiful as an affective state of mind in which our faculties of understanding and imagination cooperate with one another in a kind of free play.³⁰⁶

In a similar way, Schiller agreed that play and art were connected – both being forms of free expression – and while he saw their relationship as a complicated one, it does still echo some of Kant’s theory of the faculties coming into alignment with each other as a result of contemplating something beautiful. He transposed Kant’s theory of beauty onto Fichte’s theory of drives and believed that beauty in art or nature can awaken a fundamental drive of human nature he called the play drive.

This play-drive resulted from the material drive and the formal drive coming into synch (coming into free play with each other) as a result of the sensuous experience of beauty. For Schiller, we judge something beautiful because it is self-determining, thereby offering the “appearance [Erscheinung]” of our otherwise invisible ideal goal, freedom. Beautiful objects, he argues, can put us in a state in which we realize our highest potential as human beings; this is the result of our sense drive and form drive being perfectly equaled by the experience, allowing our

³⁰⁶ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Trans. Nicholas Walker. Ed. Robert Bernasconi. Cambridge University Press. 1987. p.127.

play drive to give rise to freedom. "...it allows the will, which exists independently of both drives, to choose between them."³⁰⁷ This, in turn, completes the concept of human nature. Play allows us humans to fulfill our very nature: "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays.*"³⁰⁸ In this way, so the Romantics later thought, art and play hold the key to combating alienation. The Romantic movement – strongly influenced by this view of art and play – would champion this idea that play (especially children's play) can combat modernity's alienation with childhood's innocence and creative powers.

7.1.2 Criticism of the Romantic Tradition of Art and Play

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith analyzes the way these two philosophical systems of aesthetics – Kant's and Schiller's – began a tradition within Western civilization of pairing art with play – a tradition picked up and popularized by the Romantic movement. This Romantic tradition influenced an understanding of the innocence of youth as being pure and noble and art as an attempt to (re)capture that innocence through childlike imagination. We can see this Romantic tradition migrating to social science via philosopher and early scholar of psychology Herbert Spencer, who agreed with Schiller that play is the result of underlying surplus energy – a heavily criticized theory, largely because children will often continue to play even when they are exhausted. (In addition, we now know that one's energy does not accrue or diminish in this way.) Nonetheless, Spencer was a very influential thinker and his view of play inspired many psychologists and sociologists who followed in his wake.

³⁰⁷ Moland, Lydia L., "Friedrich Schiller", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/schiller/>

³⁰⁸ Moland. "Friedrich Schiller."

As Sutton-Smith observes in *The Ambiguity of Play*, Spencer deviates from Schiller by arguing that play and art are “the same activity because neither refers to ulterior benefits, the proximate ends are the only ends.”³⁰⁹ Many artists of the modern period seem to affirm Spencer’s view that play and art are actually the same activity. “Leading modern artists, such as Picasso, Matisse, Gris, Kandinsky, and Klee, avowed that they would like to be able to draw like children, because children draw what they imagine and not what they see.”³¹⁰ Yet, Sutton-Smith argues, this Romantic tradition has to do more with discourse and rhetoric than empirical evidence – art and play are clearly related, but to conflate them is a fallacy. For one thing, art involves a mastery of sensuous forms that play does not require, and while both involve the imagination, play often does not result in a finished product.

Gadamer, for example, thinks that art is about play, imagination, and creation, but what sets art apart from everything else we do (craft and routine) is the ability to do otherwise. While craft needs a blueprint and routine requires a limited range of possibilities, there is no limited range in art – in art, everything is a possibility, and every choice can be answered in a multitude of different ways. What was done one way *could have been done* a different way, and thus, as Jordan Magnuson puts it in “Art as Play, Imagination, and Creation: Corporate Clones and the Scratchware Manifesto,” art produces “something that has emerged in an unrepeatable way and has manifested itself in a unique fashion.”³¹¹ Art therefore requires a process that allows for anything and everything to come to the fore – in other words, art needs play, but the two are not identical.

³⁰⁹ Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. First Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. 2001. p.133.

³¹⁰ Sutton-Smith. p.133-134.

³¹¹ Magnuson, Jordan. “Art as Play, Imagination, and Creation: Corporate Clones and the Scratchware Manifesto.” <https://www.necessarygames.com/growing-pains-video-games-and-future-art/art-play-imagination-and-creation-corporate-clones-and> Retrieved 3/19/2021

There is a connection, then, between the disinterestedness of a pure aesthetic experience and the disinterestedness many theorists hold to be central in a play experience. Part of Johan Huizinga's definition of play requires that it be "free" and that it is "connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it."³¹² Roger Caillois also argues that play "is free, or not obligatory" and that it "is unproductive in that it creates no wealth and ends as it begins."³¹³ Furthermore, it is not difficult to imagine a scenario where a particularly cultured and well-balanced game (chess or go are common examples of this) achieves an aesthetic of beauty by virtue of its elegant and sophisticated design. It is also not difficult to imagine a particular game of chess or go that plays out in a particularly beautiful way. In both of these senses (overall design and a particularly vivid or well-played instantiation), a game may be said to have an aesthetic of beauty.

Beyond the topic of beauty, there is more still to say about play aesthetics because beauty is not the only aesthetic that can be expressed by art (or games) – just as some artworks express an aesthetic of horror or comedy, so too can play harbor an aesthetic of terror or humor. A survival-horror videogame like *Bioshock* or the venerable *Resident Evil* series are great examples of games that evoke a type of horror aesthetic similar in nature to paintings by Goya or Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. What is most interesting about this topic is *how* the survival-horror videogames establish this horror aesthetic. By giving the players a very limited supply of ammo and health, by the unsettling visual and audio design of the monsters the player must fight (or flee from), and by the emphasis on silence punctuated by creepy sound effects (rather than a persistent soundtrack that is common to most other videogames), the *Resident Evil* games are

³¹² Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Publishing. Mansfield Centre, CT. 2014. Originally published in 1938. p.13.

³¹³ Caillois, Roger. Trans. Meyer Barash. *Man, Play, and Games*. University of Illinois Press: Champaign, IL. 2001. p.5-6.

designed to put players into a state Noel Carroll calls “art-horror” – they are horrified in a particular way.³¹⁴ Rather than the “normal” horror one might feel while learning about real tragedies like Pompeii or the Holocaust, art-horror always maintains a tether to the artwork that reminds the audience that it is *not* real and thus results in stimulation without the genuine horror one might feel without that background knowledge. Horror films and novels are designed to provoke art-horror in their viewers and readers – they invite us to entertain horrifying thoughts without plunging us into true terror or despair, and survival-horror videogames do this through the gameplay itself – the interactivity of games gives the sense that the player themselves are struggling against the horrible creatures and scenarios presented in the game, and so achieve a level of art-horror that few movies or books can attain.

7.1.3 Play in the Creation of Art

French-American artist, writer, and chess player Marcel Duchamp once said, “I am still a victim of chess. It has all the beauty of art—and much more. It cannot be commercialized. Chess is much purer than art in its social position.”³¹⁵ At a later date, he explained further:

The chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chess-board, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem. ... I have come to the personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists.³¹⁶

The relationship between art and play is a complicated one, in part because both concepts are elusive and ubiquitous. Artists – like game-players and game-designers – operate in different ways and defy any attempts to generalize their processes, but many have noticed that art and play are often used in conjunction with each other, and there are qualities that are shared between

³¹⁴ Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge. London, United Kingdom. 1990. p.266.

³¹⁵ Time Magazine. March 10, 1952. Vol. LIX No. 10.

³¹⁶ “Marcel Duchamp.” Kynaston McShine. 1989.

both concepts. It is well-known that many artists play with their artistic medium in order to produce something new – play (as free movement within a set of constraints) is particularly useful when trying to be creative, as the player can act out of whimsy or chance and then work with whatever is produced as a result. This back-and-forth between artist-as-player and medium can bring the artist into a flow state, just like a game-player who is “in the zone” and the result can be something even the artist did not expect (consider the previous chapter on the way play is based on unpredictability).

Writer and artist Austin Kleon – the bestselling author of *Steal Like an Artist, Show Your Work*, and other books – gave an interview that illuminates the use of play in the creation of art. He suggests that play is not about results. “If you start hoping for a result from play it gets very frustrating. I think as a creative person it’s very important to have times in your day that are results free.”³¹⁷ When asked to elaborate, he says,

You need time to futz around with stuff and you might get something great or you might get something garbage. That has almost to be built in into the day. Otherwise you are just not really doing the exploratory work that I consider art or like the real kind of raw creative stuff.

If I’m going to have a good productive work day, I’ve got to have scheduled some play time. There’s got to be time where I push pixels around photoshop or I scribble on my notebook or I draw in a pad without hoping for any kind of determined results.³¹⁸

The unpredictable and free nature of play can thus provide artists with a method of creation that is, in a certain sense, beyond their control. They don’t know where they are going, which can lead to new ideas or new techniques that can then be utilized in the creation of art. Play is one creative process that can be called upon to give creators a way to experiment without expecting

³¹⁷ Sejean, Nathalie. “Play is the Work of the Artist.” Interview with Austin Kleon.

<https://www.mentorless.com/2019/04/13/play-is-the-work-of-the-artist/> 4/13/2019. Retrieved 3/19/2021.

³¹⁸ Sejean.

particular results. This doesn't always lead to results that can be used in a productive sense, but it sometimes does. Kleon continues,

You have to have days as a creative person where you take the risk that you might not have anything to show for it at the end of the day. That is the gamble you take with playing is that you might make something great and you might make something that you might have to scrap, and that's just the nature of the work... to use that word again.³¹⁹

Artists like Kleon often utilize the creative and unpredictable nature of play to aid in the creation of their artworks, though there is no set process for doing this – its form and function will vary from artist to artist.

Gadamer offers us a rather nuanced take on the relationship between the creation of art and play. Aesthetics, for Gadamer, is the study of what objectively informs the audience's subjective awareness of art, and the audience not only participates in the artwork-as-event, but is potentially transformed by it. Art is, he argues, the subjective response to an objective communication. In "The Play of Art," he writes,

...the experience of art also presents that other dimension in which the playlike character of the creation, the very fact of its being 'played,' comes to the fore... Even if we leave to one side the difficult problem concerning the *being* of appearance, it is clear in any case that wherever such 'being played' is at issue, this manifest show belongs in the dimension of communication. The play of art as appearance is played out between us.³²⁰

The 'appearance' Gadamer mentions here is of paramount importance – it is the objective reality of the artwork, not the subjectivity of the artist, which communicates with the audience. Play can factor prominently in the creation of the appearance of the artwork, but once it is done, the matter rests entirely between the audience and the artwork. This is why Gadamer calls artistic

³¹⁹ Sejean.

³²⁰ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Trans. Nicholas Walker. Ed. Robert Bernasconi. Cambridge University Press. 1987. p. 128.

creation “a true show” – the work speaks for the artist, so it is up to the artist to keep nothing back and communicate without reserve.

In this way, Gadamer sees the process of artistic creation as a performance, with the artist’s play being the source of the artwork’s final form.

The comparison between the forms of play discovered and created by men, and the uninhibited movement of play exhibited by superabundant life, can teach us that precisely what is at issue in the play of art is not some substitute dream-world in which we can forget ourselves. On the contrary, the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about... those who have looked deeply into human nature have recognized that our capacity for play is an expression of the highest seriousness. For we read in Nietzsche, ‘Mature manhood: that means to have found again the seriousness one had as a child – in play.’ Nietzsche also knew the reverse of this as well, and celebrated the creative power of life – and of art – in the divine ease of play.³²¹

Gadamer sees play as the most direct and honest form of artistic communication through the work of art, in a way analogous to the “play” of natural or social forces. The artist is essentially a communicator, and play is the most profound form of that communication. Once the work of art is presented, the communication takes on an objective life of its own and the audience brings in their subjective awareness – the artist at this point is out of the picture. Their art – often, their play – is what engages with the audience. The practice of art is playful, but art and play are not identical. They do share some similarities, however. Both art and play draw the audience into an event. In addition, art and play are both considered autotelic activities – they are done for their own sake. Finally, just as no one knows how a play activity will end, no one knows towards what end an artwork will work – it is what occurs when the artwork is ‘in-play’ (completed and being experienced by the audience) that matters.

³²¹ Gadamer. *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. p.130.

In practice, artists sometimes don't know what they are going to express until they have expressed it. As free movements within a set of constraints, play as a process can serve to bridge the gap between the beginning of an artistic project and its completion. However, too little is known about the creative process in a psychological and neurological sense – it is surely the most staggeringly complex of all the mental processes in human beings, and even simpler human mental processes are shrouded in mystery.³²² Nonetheless, philosophers have made attempts to suss out the relationship between art and play, and there are theories that remain popular explanations of this relationship even today.

7.1.4 Can (Video)games be Art?

As a particular form of play activity, games have their own relationship to art. There was a time – from 1983³²³ to around 2000 – when the big debate was whether games (specifically videogames) should be considered art. There were heated discussions with big names on both sides. In a blog post, film critic Roger Ebert once argued,

One obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives, and an outcome. Santiago might cite [an] immersive game without points or rules, but I would say then it ceases to be a game and becomes a representation of a story, a novel, a play, dance, a film. Those are things you cannot win; you can only experience them.³²⁴

Ultimately, however, with the advent of “art games” – which use videogame technology to create explicitly artistic works intended for the art gallery – and the popular opinion that games are as

³²² Hospers, John. “Philosophy of Art.” Britannica.com. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-art/Art-as-expression> Retrieved 3/19/2021

³²³ One of the earliest examples of this debate comes from the video game magazine *Video Games Player* which in 1983 wrote that video games “are as much an art form as any [other] field of entertainment.” https://archive.org/details/Video_Games_Player_Vol_2_No_1_1983-09_Carnegie_Publications_US/page/n47/mode/2up Retrieved 10/21/2021.

³²⁴ “Roger Ebert: games *may* be art. One day.” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2010/jul/01/roger-ebert-games-art> Retrieved 10/11/2021.

much works of art as other popular media like film or novels, the general consensus is that games are at least popular art, with the capacity to be used in fine art, if the medium is leveraged in that pursuit. For instance, games have been afforded legal protection as creative works by the Supreme Court of the United States. The idea Ebert championed – that art cannot be won and games’ interactivity keeps them from being true art – is no longer the dominant view. Now, it is more common to believe that (as Gadamer argues) ALL art is in fact interactive, with the subjective contents of the audience’s minds being engaged by the external objective work of art. Audiences bring much of their cultural and social background to the art experience, and meaning is thus shared between the work of art itself and the eye of the beholder. Contrary to Ebert’s opinion, fine art like painting or film are not passive experiences – they are interactive as well, just not to the extent that games are interactive. Games, furthermore, are not necessarily “winnable” – plenty of games like children’s make-believe, games of improvisation, or “sandbox” computer games like *Minecraft* are not winnable in the classic sense, yet few would agree with Ebert that they cease to be games simply because they lack a discrete win-state.

In addition, art games are explicitly *created* to be winnable works of art, in direct defiance of Ebert’s claims. Although the concept predates 2002, that is when the label “art game” was introduced in an academic context; it now has come to mean a videogame designed to emphasize its artistic merit, or to have a structure intended to produce a reaction in the audience.³²⁵ An art game is always interactive and often competitive, pitting the audience against the computer or other players.³²⁶ Ultimately, in 2010, Ebert conceded that games may indeed be

³²⁵ Steinberg, Scott. “Who says video games aren’t art?”. CNN.

<http://www.cnn.com/2010/TECH/gaming/gadgets/08/31/video.games.art.steinberg/>. Retrieved 08/31/2010.

³²⁶ Cannon, Rebecca. “Introduction to Artistic Computer Game Modification”. Plaything Conference 2003 (Sydney, Australia). October 2003. Archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20040309221102/http://www.dlux.org.au/plaything/media/rebecca_cannon_web.pdf. Retrieved on 10/14/2021.

art in a “non-traditional” sense³²⁷, and that he enjoyed playing *Cosmology of Kyoto*, a beloved adventure game from 1994.³²⁸

7.1.5 On the Artistic Merit of Play

Interactivity and winnability aside, there are really two senses in which games might be considered art. Certainly, games can be art in the sense that they involve artistic elements – games have soundtracks, and music is art. Similarly, someone has to draw the visual assets utilized by the game, and modern games often involve the contributions of actors and writers, which both “count as” art. But there is another aspect of the games-as-art discourse: can the *play of a game* be art? Beyond those aspects of digital games that are shared with other art forms, is there an aesthetics of play itself?

As artworks, videogames are sometimes held to be exemplary in their relationship to possible modes of interactivity – by allowing free movement within a system of constraints, they allow game designers to communicate complex ideas in interesting ways. Games can deliver on an aesthetic when they give us the emotional experience associated with that aesthetic. In the critically acclaimed 2007 first-person shooter *Bioshock*³²⁹, for example, the game explicates a criticism of the greed-is-good philosophy of Ayn Rand. Some of these arguments are made in monologues by various characters representing different ideals and flaws – not unlike what one might find in a novel or film – but the most impactful arguments are made through the

³²⁷ Ebert made a follow-up blog post wherein he wisely adjusts his position. He wrote, “My error in the first place was to think I could make a convincing argument on purely theoretical grounds. What I was saying is that video games could not in principle be Art. That was a foolish position to take, particularly as it seemed to apply to the entire unseen future of games. This was pointed out to me maybe hundreds of times. How could I disagree? It is quite possible a game could someday be great Art.”

³²⁸ Ebert, Roger (2010-07-01). “[Okay, kids, play on my lawn](#)”. *Chicago Sun-Times*. Archived from [the original](#) on August 11, 2010. Retrieved 2010/08/31.

³²⁹ *Bioshock*. 2K Games. 2007.

environments that the player explores for much of the game. The once beautiful undersea capitalist utopia of Rapture has become a maze of horrors, and by searching through the art deco ruins for medical supplies or ammo – necessities for the player’s survival – the game reveals the story of Rapture to the player. It is this narrative tool that formulates the game’s criticism of Rand as the player slowly uncovers the events which took place prior to the start of the game that left Rapture a ruin full of mutated madmen and senseless violence. This is a tale told through interactivity (exploration, investigation) that would fundamentally weaken if it were to lose its interactive element. The play *is* the aesthetic.

In *The Aesthetic of Play*, Brian Upton argues that there is indeed an aesthetic aspect to the experience of game-playing – “how playful activities unfold from moment to moment as we participate in them, and how the rules we adopt constrain the shape of that unfolding.” He describes a framework “for thinking rigorously about play, for understanding why some play spaces work and others don’t, and for understanding how play can be structured to deliver particular experiences for particular players.” In describing this framework, Upton investigates “how meaning-making play is not merely a feature of games, but actually permeates virtually every aspect of human culture.”³³⁰ We can judge a game to be good aesthetically by considering its good-making properties, but ultimately there is something ephemeral about the aesthetics of a play activity – we know a good game when we see one, but it is hard to codify. Upton attempts to do this – though his thoughts are directed towards games, especially videogames, they can be applied to any play experience.

Some play spaces are better than others. On a purely personal level, we enjoy some games and don’t enjoy others. On a societal level, some games are wildly popular and endure for years; others find only a tiny audience and are quickly forgotten. If a play space is defined by its system of constraints, there must be something about how those constraints are organized that determines the quality

³³⁰ Upton, Brian. *The Aesthetics of Play*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 2015. p.4

of the space. What sorts of constraints yield good play spaces, and what sorts of constraints yield bad ones?³³¹

In order to account for the wide range of possible interactions a play may have with a game (only a few of which will actually come to pass) Upton uses the idea of a “horizon of intent.” “The horizon of intent is the set of all states that the player believes to be valid, attainable, and desirable in the near future. It is defined by the player’s current set of active internal constraints.”³³² Constraints are the collection of rules, preferences, and intentions that determine what moves are permitted.

Constraints act as a filter on intent. They determine what changes to the [game] state are allowed. But at the same time, the state determines which rules are active. This reciprocal relationship between constraints and state creates a situation in which both our position within the overall system and the immediate restrictions on our moment-to-moment actions are continually shifting and evolving... the quality of that [play] experience is determined largely by the game’s capacity to vary those active constraints in interesting or even seductive ways.³³³

Constraints can be further divided into two types: active and potential constraints. “An active constraint affects our actions right now; a potential constraint may affect us some time in the future, or may have affected us at some time in the past.”³³⁴ Game designers, Upton says, ought to be most concerned with the active constraints of a given play scenario, since those are the constraints that most govern how a player will behave in that scenario (with the understanding that active constraints sometimes become potential ones, just as potential constraints sometimes become active ones when the conditions in the state of the game are right).

We can think of a game as an engine for generating horizons of intent. A good game is one that consistently generates interesting horizons. But what does it

³³¹ Upton. p.51

³³² Upton. p.48

³³³ Upton. p.26

³³⁴ Upton. p.25

mean for a horizon to be ‘Interesting?’ What specific properties distinguish a good horizon from a bad one?³³⁵

While the notion of a game as a generator of horizons of intent seems rather instrumental, it actually points towards the non-instrumental value judgments that fall under the umbrella of judgments of taste – there is no step-by-step guide to creating a *good* game, although there are design techniques that can move a game towards that goal. Like a good melody, we can recognize a good game when we play one, even though the design process to produce one is elusive and difficult to quantify.

Looking at *Bioshock* once again as an example, we can see that the active constraints focus on survival, which has several aspects. The player must scrounge the environments for food and ammo, avoid or ambush dangerous enemies, and keep an eye out for upgrades or powers – all of this ensures that the player pays close attention to their surroundings, where they learn the posthumous story of how Rapture – meant to be a capitalist utopia – fell into chaos and horror. Throughout the game, the player will encounter a monster called a Little Sister – a little girl who has been warped by an unknown mutagen who goes around collecting ADAM from corpses. They are each protected by a guardian known as a Big Daddy – a formidable foe who requires careful forethought and strategy to defeat. Once the Big Daddy is dispatched, the player is faced with a moral dilemma: they can choose to save the Little Sister, healing her mutation and restoring her to her normal self. Or, they can kill the Little Sister and harvest her ADAM to increase the player’s own power level. By making the player choose their course of action, the game is able to point out a fatal flaw in the Randian philosophy of Rapture and why it fell – we make decisions based on our emotions, but that isn’t necessarily a bad thing – if the player chooses to save the Little Sisters, the healed children will deliver gifts to the player to help them

³³⁵ Upton. p.51

on their way. The Randian decision to kill them actually sets the player back – in this case, altruism is the more utilitarian option. By making the player make this decision, *Bioshock* communicates a philosophical argument about morality through the interactivity of the play experience and the survival-horror aesthetic it generates contributes to the overall aesthetic experience.

Upton builds a heuristic framework consisting of six characteristics of a good horizon of intent:

Choice – Horizons offer a range of possible actions

Variety – Horizons aren't repeated

Consequence – Actions have outcomes

Predictability – Outcomes can be anticipated

Uncertainty – Outcomes aren't predetermined

Satisfaction – Desirable outcomes are attainable³³⁶

A “good game” (both in terms of being well-designed as well as attaining a beautiful aesthetic) is one that is successfully designed to attain these qualities – there is beauty in designing or playing a game that has these characteristics. However, it is *difficult* to design a game with these characteristics. There are many pitfalls that a game designer must avoid or surmount to achieve a good design. Let's look at Choice for an example: too few choices in a game can lead to boredom as the horizon of intent is too small to be of interest, yet giving the player too many choices all at once can result in an intimidatingly large horizon of intent and can thus fail to capture the player. Thus, though designing a good game involves a level of craftsmanship, there

³³⁶ Upton. p.51

is an art to it that defies simple adherence to a set of good-making principles – those principles exist, for sure, but they are as elusive as a good melody or keen cinematography.

Ultimately, Upton persuasively argues that designing a game is not so much about the rules of the game itself, but more about the reasons *behind* the rules and the experience of play that the game can bring to its players. The aesthetic of play, therefore, is the meaning of rules – how these rules work on the minds of players, and the play space that rules build in their heads. Designing a game is therefore equivalent to figuring out what playspace one wishes to build in players’ heads, and how one wants that playspace to function. That is where the aesthetic experience of a game exists.

7.2 Play and Ethics

7.2.1 The Ethical Dimension of Play

Play has a strong ethical dimension to it as well. It is common wisdom that participating in organized games at a young age instills certain virtues in the players. Team sports are often considered to be character-building activities where the players learn cooperation, dedication, and the benefits of hard work – virtues they will hopefully carry into their adult lives. Even during the course of the game, the players’ moral character can shine through their play. One famous saying claims that “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than a year of conversation.”³³⁷ While the formal properties of a game can be an object of beauty through its elegance or simplicity, the game as an object of moral consideration is a bit more mysterious.

There are no formal properties of a game that lend it a moral character; instead, it seems the moral aspect of gameplaying comes from the fact that games are rules-based at all, rather

³³⁷ This saying is often misattributed to Plato. Its actual author is anonymous.

than the particular rules involved in a particular game.³³⁸ In fact, the moral code that players are expected to obey during the course of play varies wildly from game to game and sits quite apart from the written rules of the game. In soccer, for instance, it is considered good gamesmanship to playact receiving an injury from the smallest contact with the players on the other team, just in case you can convince the referee to call a foul. It is an expected and accepted part of the game's culture.

In golf, on the other hand, where it is easy to cheat because scores and penalties are largely self-reported, it is entirely inappropriate to do so in any way. As the famous story goes, Bobby Jones was competing in the 1925 U. S. Open. Although no one else was around it see it happen, Jones' ball moved ever so slightly while he was addressing it in the rough.

There were no referees to call a foul, no officials to slap him with a penalty. Jones' playing companion, Walter Hagen, didn't see the infraction, nor did his caddie or any spectators. The tournament title hung in the balance, but when the round was completed, it soon became known that Jones had assessed himself a 1-stroke penalty.

The ball moving did not help him any, nor was it any great violation. But it happened, and those are the rules. So Jones thought nothing of it. That stroke cost him outright victory, and he then went on to lose a 36-hole playoff to Willie Macfarlane.³³⁹

After the game, sportswriter O.B. Keeler praised Jones for his sportsmanship. The golfer, however, requested that he not even write about the matter, telling the sportswriter, "You might as well praise me for not robbing banks." The letter of the rules is sacrosanct in golf-- even if some of them are a bit peculiar and even if violating them offers you little to no advantage.

And what makes this all the more important to golfers is that they typically are left to police themselves. Only at the highest level of competition – major

³³⁸ Of course, many videogames present morally charged narratives; what I am referring to here is the moral dimension found even in games without such narratives, such as sports or games of make-believe.

³³⁹ Harig, Bob. "Golf's honor code limits 'cheating' incidents". ESPN.com. 8/7/2007. https://www.espn.com/espn/cheat/columns/story?columnist=harig_bob&id=2964423. Retrieved 3/19/2021.

championships, for example – is there a rules official nearby, and even then not always with every group.

So it becomes the players' job to enforce the rules themselves, many times at their own expense.

“There's that old saying that if you're not cheating, you're not trying,” said the LPGA Tour's Meg Mallon, a four-time major championship winner. “That applies in every other sport, but not ours. That's just the way the game is. It started as a gentleman's game, and it has kept going. You learn that it is a badge of honor to play the rules and call penalties on yourself. It is a game of integrity.”

Mallon said. “And stuff happens all the time. You can't live with yourself if you don't call it. I just couldn't play feeling that way.”

...Jones said: “When you cheat in golf, the only person you're cheating is yourself.”³⁴⁰

Notice the moral language the golfers use to describe their motives for playing by the rules – they might use similar language to explain why it is important not to murder or rob banks. This is but one example of the use of moral language to describe the constraints (rules, written or unwritten) of a game.

Another famous incident worthy of our attention occurred in 1981, during the World Series Cup of cricket. Australia was playing New Zealand at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. New Zealand needed a six off the last ball to tie the match. So, Australian captain Greg Chappell instructed his brother Trevor to roll the ball underhanded at the batsman, making it impossible to hit a six. This was perfectly allowable according to the rulebook, but earned the Chappells the ire of the entire cricketing world. As the ball was being bowled, Ian Chappell – who was the eldest of the Chappell brothers and a former Australian captain himself – was commenting on the match and cried out, “No, Greg, no, you can't do that!”³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Harig.

³⁴¹ “34 Years of Trevor Chappell’s Infamous Underarm Delivery.” Sports Adda India. <http://www.sportsaddaindia.com/30-years-of-trevor-chappells-infamous-underarm-delivery/> Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150222220805/http://www.sportsaddaindia.com/30-years-of-trevor-chappells-infamous-underarm-delivery/>. Retrieved 3/25/2021.

Richie Benaud – another former Australian captain who was commenting on the match for Channel 9 – called the act “disgraceful” and said it was “one of the worst things I have ever seen done on a cricket field.”³⁴² According to New Zealand cricketer Warren Lees – who spoke about the incident on New Zealand's *20/20* current affairs show in 2005 – there was a long silence in the dressing room afterwards, until Mark Burgess (another player) suddenly and without warning smashed a tea cup. Later, Robert Muldoon – the then-Prime Minister of New Zealand – called it “the most disgusting incident I can recall in the history of cricket” and that “it was an act of true cowardice and I consider it appropriate that the Australian team were wearing yellow.”³⁴³ Even the Australian Prime Minister at the time – Malcolm Fraser – called it “contrary to the traditions of the game.” Directly because of the infamous underarm bowl of 1981, underarm bowling was officially banned (unless otherwise agreed before the match) by the International Cricket Council, who stated that the act was “not within the spirit of the game.”³⁴⁴

Why are people's reactions to this incident so emotional and deeply felt? Why is such strong language so often used to describe it? Certainly, there was a lot at stake, but the word choices suggest a deeper, more visceral feeling of violation than merely losing the match. The rules were followed but a code of honor was breached and moral judgments were made about the players involved. Games exist because of their constraints (which include rules but also inclinations and codes of behavior). To violate these constraints is to engage in some other activity than playing the game – according to some theorists, to violate the constraints of a game

³⁴² “Most disgraceful moment in the history of cricket.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K65_spUU05s Retrieved 3/25/2021.

³⁴³ Rowney, Jo-Anne. “The line between gamesmanship and cheating”. BBC Sport. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8148183.stm> Retrieved 3/25/2021.

³⁴⁴ “No Ball”. The Laws of Cricket. <https://www.lords.org/mcc/the-laws-of-cricket/no-ball> Retrieved 3/25/2021.

is to be playing the game of “cheating at x,” rather than playing the game x itself. One cannot play except by accepting the constraints of the game being played. To obey the constraints of a game is simply what it means to be playing that game. To violate this voluntary acceptance is seen as a defilement of something pure and good because play is, at its heart, a voluntary activity (see Huizinga, Caillois, and Suits, among others). To break with that activity while still posing as a player not only breaks your participation in the activity, but breaking with the activity ruins the activity itself. Nothing will end a game faster than a trifler, cheat, or spoilsport. In this sense, the constraints of a game are a categorical imperative – you can’t play the game without accepting them, for to deny them is to deny the activity of the game itself.

7.2.2 The Rules of Play as Analogous to the State

In *Knowing the Score*, British academic philosopher David Papineau looks at a variety of philosophical topics from the perspective of sport. He likens playing a game to being a citizen of a state. The code of fair play – that is, the expectations players have for each other – is analogous to the social contract by which all citizens join in the affairs of their society. Like that social contract, this code can diverge from the official rules (laws). Different sports have different conventions, which are passed down from one generation to the next, just as cultural mores and traditions are transmitted within a society. Papineau thinks that you are playing a sport when you accept the authority of the referee or other officials, not when you are obeying the rules of the game. After all, in games like basketball, it is common practice to commit a foul when there are 20 seconds left and you are down by 1 – the referee’s whistle is essentially just a formality. And in soccer it is common to take a red card to prevent an opponent scoring (unless it is a two-footed tackle that might break a leg). In other words, breaking the rules does not mean you are not

playing the game. Just the opposite: in some cases, breaking the rules is part of playing the game well.

Papineau suggests – continuing his analogy between sports and society – that perhaps citizens (players) have a moral duty to respect the state (referee) but no duty to obey the laws as such (no compulsion to conform to the rules). Committing a foul in basketball doesn’t mean you aren’t playing basketball, but disobeying or ignoring the referee certainly does! It can be proper to break a rule and accept the penalty, so long as one cedes authority to the officials. A citizen must accept the state, but not necessarily its laws. “While we must certainly accept the state’s authority, we only have a duty to obey the law when it would be moral to do so anyway.”³⁴⁵ The state is the enforcer of moral duty, but not its author. This explains why the underhanded bowling incident of 1981 was met with such disgust and horror, despite not being technically against the rules. It went against the code of honor, but it was still playing cricket. Importantly, it was *playing cricket poorly* in a moral sense, despite being the smart move in a gamesmanship sense.

7.2.3 Sportsmanship and Gamesmanship

When discussing ethical behavior and play, we can talk about a dichotomy between one’s sportsmanship and one’s gamesmanship. Sportsmanship is essentially the same as ethical behavior in a non-play context – treat others with respect, follow the rules you are expected to follow, display honesty and integrity, etc. Generally speaking, good people have little problem summoning sportsmanship – it comes naturally from being a good person. Gamesmanship, on the other hand, is something different entirely. It is not quite the opposite of sportsmanship – that

³⁴⁵ Papineau, David. *Knowing the Score: What Sports Can Teach Us About Philosophy (And What Philosophy Can Teach Us About Sports)*. 2017.

is, it is not simply a lack of sportsmanship. Rather, gamesmanship is taking the challenge of play seriously and giving it your all to win. Rather than something to avoid entirely, gamesmanship is an integral part of organized play and is desirable in the right amount. A total lack of gamesmanship is actually quite problematic, as the player will be seen as not giving it their best shot – we want to see a certain amount of gamesmanship in every player who is taking the competition seriously, but too much gamesmanship is indeed a problem.

The term gamesmanship was popularized in 1947 by humorist Steven Potter in *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship (or the Art of Winning Games without Actually Cheating)*. Gamesmanship is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the art or practice of winning games by questionable expedients without actually violating the rules” or “the use of ethically dubious methods to gain an objective.”³⁴⁶ The most common gamesmanship techniques suggested by Potter involve breaking the flow of an opponent’s play (Potter insisted “There is only one rule; BREAK THE FLOW”) by taking an extra-long time between dart throws, feigning an injury to delay the game or to advertised a lower level of ability than you actually have, or distracting the opposing player by complaining about other people who might be (but are not) distracting the opposing player.

Potter recommended this last approach because he insists that the good gamesman should always give the appearance of being a good sportsman. For instance, while an opponent is taking a shot in billiards, bad gamesmanship would involve fidgeting and whistling to distract them while a good gamesman would distract them by noisily requesting silence from the spectators. He writes, “Simulate annoyance, *on the opponent's behalf*, with the onlookers.”³⁴⁷ Other

³⁴⁶ Merriam-Webster.com. “Gamesmanship”. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gamesmanship> Retrieved 4/30/2021.

³⁴⁷ Potter, Steven. *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship (or the Art of Winning Games without Actually Cheating)*. London, UK. 1947. p.60

gamesmanship techniques include “causing the opponent to overthink” by asking one's opponent for advice for a (fictitious) match the following day, against an opponent one implies is much stronger than one's current opponent, taking a timeout right before the opposing kicker attempts a field goal in American football, or giving (intentionally vague) advice in the hope of making the opponent focus on their play. In such “advicemanship,” “the advice *must be vague*, to make certain it is not helpful,”³⁴⁸ although Potter also noted that “according to some authorities the advice should be quite genuine and perfectly practical.”³⁴⁹ Potter notes that these techniques are only effective against some opponents.

[P]erhaps the most difficult type for the gamesman to play is the man who indulges in pure play. He gets down to it, he gets on with it, he plays each shot according to its merits, and his own powers, without a trace of exhibitionism, and no by-play whatever.³⁵⁰

Potter gloomily concludes the book with a tongue-in-cheek warning: “we amateurs have to fight against the growing menace of young people who insist on playing their various games for the fun of the thing...indulging rather too freely, if the truth were known, in pure play.”³⁵¹ While the tone of the book is silly and unserious, the concept of gamesmanship is one that has endured. Some sports expect the players to engage in an “appropriate” amount of gamesmanship (otherwise, the players are not playing as well as they possibly can). There is, of course, such a thing as too much gamesmanship, where it slides into unsportsmanlike conduct and spoils the spirit of the game. But the right amount of gamesmanship is vital to playing a “good” game – one that is hard fought and challenging.

³⁴⁸ Potter. p.45.

³⁴⁹ Potter. p.123.

³⁵⁰ Potter. p.41.

³⁵¹ Potter. p.117.

7.2.4 The Ethical Value of Play

Echoing Dewey, Ólafur Páll Jónsson noted in his presentation at the “Ethics of Play” international philosophical conference in Prague that, while children’s play has *instrumental* value in its educational relevance – building up a world of meaning by offering the rich circumstances necessary for meaning-making to take place – children’s play also has *non-instrumental* value as a moral way of living. “The attitude of play is central for the flourishing child” and “is constitutive of the good life.”³⁵² Thus, in these two ways, play can contribute to the moral character of the players in a lasting way.

It is common wisdom that participating in organized play, especially sports, contributes positively to the moral development of youths. Playing sports can teach valuable life lessons to participants: that it’s okay to make mistakes, how to be a good leader or follower, how to communicate with body language, how to control emotions, how to set and then achieve goals, how to win with grace or lose with dignity, how to take care of one’s physical health, how to develop discipline, how to deal with pressure and stress, how to manage one’s time, etc.³⁵³ It is important to note that these lessons come from playing – mastering a sport means learning these lessons, and learning these lessons allows one to excel at a sport.

It is obvious why people would get their kids into organized play activities in order to learn good sportsmanship (and, through it, more general lessons on positive behavior), but learning a bit of gamesmanship is actually helpful in a different way. We live in a world of rules, be they laws, codes of conduct, oaths, or etiquette. Understanding how to operate within the bounds of those rules while still angling for the best possible outcome is a skill that can greatly

³⁵² “Ethics of play.” International philosophical conference. Prague, November 18-20, 2014.
<http://web.flu.cas.cz/filosofievexperimentu/ethicsofplay/> Retrieved 4/30/2021.

³⁵³ “21 Life Lessons Kids Learn Through Youth Sports”. Basketball for Coaches.
<https://www.basketballforcoaches.com/life-lessons/> Retrieved 4/30/2021.

help one navigate those rules without failing to keep one's own goals in mind. Gamesmanship is not "playing nice," but it is sometimes the best play, and getting personal experience with gamesmanship can equip a person with a knowledge of working within a system to get a desired result. As long as sportsmanship is upheld alongside it, gamesmanship can actually be a very positive skillset for dealing with the real world, and play gives one a way to experiment with it and understand it.

7.3 Aesthetics and Ethics of Play

7.3.1 Aesthetic Answers to the Ethical Question, "What Ought One Do?"

I have shown how play has both an aesthetic dimension and an ethical one. Now I aim to show how those two dimensions are related to each other through play. Combining the philosophy of art with moral philosophy is not a new concept – it has a centuries-long tradition in scholarly discourse and before examining how aesthetics and ethics are united in play, it is important to explain why aesthetics and ethics ought to be combined at all. To that end, I will discuss some examples of philosophers who argue for this combination. Certainly, it is easy to see that both fields are concerned with questions of value judgments – aesthetics being concerned with affect and beauty and ethics being concerned with moral values. In this way, both aesthetics and ethics are contained within axiology, which seeks to understand the criteria of human values and of judgments made about those values. Both aesthetics and ethics have ideologically and historically conditioned discourses. Play is one instance that displays the union of ethics and aesthetics.

Wittgenstein famously wrote in his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*: "It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Aesthetics and Ethics are one and the

same.)”³⁵⁴ Plato and Aristotle, as noted above, believed that the Good, the Beautiful, and the True all pointed at each other and Kant believed that beauty is a “symbol of morality.” Since Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, the rationalist view of ethics has dominated the discourse. It maintains that we need to subsume particular actions under universal laws – both utilitarianism and deontological ethics do this. However, other philosophers dissent from this view.

7.3.2 Process Philosophy and the Aesthetic Answer to the Ethical Question

Two process philosophers – Alfred North Whitehead and John Dewey – both argue that Kant is mistaken when it comes to forming a basis for moral judgements, and they use aesthetics to explain their thoughts. Process philosophy arises from the premise that the nature of being is dynamic and that a comprehensive philosophical account of reality ought to focus on that dynamism.³⁵⁵ Aesthetics, they argue, is not limited to reflections on the sublime or the beauty of nature and art, nor is aesthetics reducible to taste. In their metaphysics, they both illustrate the aesthetic dimension of moral experience and point towards the aesthetic categories of feeling and imagination instead of reason to guide ethical behavior. Whitehead encourages his readers to see moral experience as an aesthetic phenomenon; Dewey argues that our imagination is what enables us to resolve ethical problems, and the basis for our imagination is not simply rational but also experiential and perceptual.

Because our experiences are always specific and contextual, we need a more general descriptive ethics, not universal moral laws. Both of these process philosophers see moral experience as continuous with the aesthetic experience (intensity, meaning, and harmony) and

³⁵⁴ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. 1922. Trans. C. K. Ogden. On Project Gutenberg. Released 10/22/2010. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf> Retrieved 10/14/2021.

³⁵⁵ Seibt, Johanna. “Process Philosophy”. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. First published 10/15/2012; substantive revision 10/26/2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-philosophy/> Retrieved 4/30/2021.

thus imagination and vision (not just calculative rationality) are operative in navigating ethical dilemmas. To this end, Whitehead makes feeling a metaphysical category and thus gives emotion a critical role in the ethical process. Dewey closes the gap between practical, scientific, and moral questions by giving imagination primacy. Play is in operation here for both Whitehead and Dewey – it is through play that we make full use of our imagination, and play affords us a space wherein we are free to experiment and experience and develop the axiological foundations of our own meaning-making regarding value judgments.³⁵⁶

7.3.3 Nietzsche's Aesthetic Answer to the Ethical Question

Nietzsche – and those who follow him, whom Spariosu calls “artist-metaphysicians” – also provides play as an aesthetic answer to the ethical question. He argues for a new form of moral valuation because, as he famously proclaims, “God is Dead,” and with Him our objective basis for moral behavior. In Nietzsche’s philosophical system – which is at one time both at odds with and inspired by the Kant-Schiller tradition of aesthetics – he argues that the Will to Power is the Will to Beauty, and that humanity needs an aesthetic answer to the ethical question of “what ought one do?”³⁵⁷ In place of the moral theory of good and evil, Nietzsche suggests using aesthetic values to govern behavior – a common interpretation of which is that art is a sufficient justification for life (with all its pain and misery). However, the point is deeper than the exultation of art. In the *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche moves instead towards a theory of the beautiful that holds the lives of exemplary individuals as the aesthetic justification of life.³⁵⁸ If

³⁵⁶ Vannatta, Seth. “Problems at the Intersection of Aesthetics and Ethics”. Response Journal. <https://responsejournal.net/issue/2016-08/article/problems-intersection-aesthetics-and-ethics> Retrieved 4/28/2021.

³⁵⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Will to Power*. Random House. New York, NY. 1967.

³⁵⁸ Church, Jeffrey. “The Aesthetic Justification of Existence: Nietzsche on the Beauty of Exemplary Lives”. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Autumn 2015). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jnietstud.46.3.0289> Retrieved 10/14/2021. p.289-307.

one lives one's life as a work of art, leading an exemplary existence according to one's foundational principles, then one has made their life aesthetically justifiable and of worth.³⁵⁹ In other words, one's self – how one behaves – is akin to a work of art that one constructs through individual decisions about what kind of person one is, and through this self-creation, justification for life can be found.

In his later works, he says that the philosophers of the future will need the pure creativity of the child to create new systems of values, and that the overman – mankind's purpose – is one who plays as a way of innocent creating. Building towards this free-spirited Overman, Nietzsche sees mankind's spiritual development metaphorically as three stages. American moral philosopher Lawrence M. Hinman – Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of San Diego – provides a succinct explanation:

In the passage on "The Three Metamorphoses" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche develops a three-stage framework within which to understand the development of the human spirit. Beginning at the stage of the camel, the spirit frees itself by becoming a lion and then, in creative play, transforms himself into a child... The movement is from a world whose meaning is already given to a world composed of potential playthings: things which wait upon the appearance of a creative subject (the child) to receive their meaning.³⁶⁰

The first two stages – the camel, who carries the weight of the prescribed meaning of values, and the lion, who lashes out and destroys those values – describe Nietzsche's criticism of the morality of good and evil. But the third and final stage is very different. After the lion has destroyed the pre-given system of values, it is up to the child to reevaluate all values – creating new values that affirm existence. Hinman writes,

The activity proper to this child is "the play of creating." It is precisely through this creative playing that the child is differentiated from the lion, and the lion's

³⁵⁹ Church, p.289-307.

³⁶⁰ Hinman, Lawrence M., "Nietzsche's Philosophy of Play". *Philosophy Today*. 1974. p.111-112.

function emerges as establishing the conditions under which such creative play could be possible.³⁶¹

Like those in the Romantic tradition, Nietzsche sees the innocent play of the child as the model for the spiritual development of mankind. His Overman, who will have to reevaluate all values and create their own, is modeled on the child at play.

That hypothetical future is not the only place for play in Nietzsche's philosophy. In fact, Nietzsche understands all human activity in terms of play. Hinman elaborates,

[For Nietzsche,] human activity is understood in terms of play. Different types of human activity are interpreted in terms of an order of rank, the lowest ranks being those in which the player is dominated by the game (in which case he becomes a plaything of forces beyond his control), the highest ranks being those in which this plaything creates as fully as possible its own world (this is the player par excellence, the child, the free spirit, the Overman).³⁶²

This understanding of human activity as play is a direct result of Nietzsche's confrontation with nihilism; play, for Nietzsche, holds the key to overcoming nihilism. The term which most fully expresses mankind's creative play is the will to power (which is also the will to beauty). Hinman continues,

The most powerful expression of that will to power which expresses itself in many modes, including interpreting – is the creation of a world which mirrors the fundamental structure of the will to power itself: a play world.³⁶³

Furthermore, Nietzsche's interpretation of the world as a world-play can be found in his doctrine of the eternal recurrence. "[T]he world is transformed by the overman's will to power from a chaotic interplay of forces into a structured play which eternally repeats itself as the creative play to the will to power."³⁶⁴ Thus, we see Nietzsche views creative play as the highest form of

³⁶¹ Hinman. p.50

³⁶² Hinman. p.107

³⁶³ Hinman. p.107

³⁶⁴ Hinman. p.107

activity of the human spirit. It is in play that aesthetics and ethics are united and new values can be made.

7.3.4 Ethics through the Aesthetic of Agency

The highly interactive nature of games affords game makers a powerful tool for creating an aesthetic through the agency of the player – the players’ participation in the experience allows for their direct involvement in the story. In fact, the stories in most games are *about* the player or the player-controlled avatar and cannot progress without the involvement of the player. Some games, like *Bioshock*, utilize this dynamic structure to express their narrative or to deliver their rhetorical message. In *Bioshock*, the message is a philosophical critique of Randian objectivism, which the game argues does not account for human sentimentality – with its benefits and its pitfalls. By playing on the player’s own sentiment – by making them choose how to handle the Little Sisters, with mercy or with ruthless self-interest – the game puts the player in a position where the tenets of objectivism as an ethical theory are tested. This is a much richer form of rhetoric than merely telling the audience the tale – the player is confronted with the dilemma and must consider the pros and cons of their actions to progress through the game.

But videogames are not the only play activities where this engagement exists. Many games of make-believe or role play have the same structure: a playworld where events transpire according to the involvement of the player(s). Tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are more involved than even explicitly didactic videogames like *Bioshock*. The game is run by a Dungeon Master (DM), who writes the narrative and serves as the referee, while the other players each create and control a player-character of their own invention. The players guide their characters through the world the DM has created, with the DM narrating and describing the various environments, nonplayer-characters, and monsters that the players encounter. However,

because the DM is human and is able to improvise and tell a story about whatever characters the players have come up with, and because the experience is far more collaborative than a videogame, the direction the story will go is highly unpredictable and develops organically. The DM can use this to build any aesthetic they wish, and the players – acting as their player-characters – can inhabit different personas while they play. This affords them a way of seeing things from another’s (fictional) perspective, and making different choices than they would choose were they acting as themselves. “What would my character do?” is a common question players must ask themselves before deciding on a course of action for their player-characters. The aesthetic dimension and the ethical dimension are thus both extremely strong in *D&D* and other tabletop role-playing games.

7.3.5 Towards a Practical Ethics through Aesthetics

Beyond didactic videogames like *Bioshock* (which has a clear ethical message), there is evidence that participating in immersive aesthetic activities like role-playing games or theatre can help build moral intelligence simply by virtue of putting one in the shoes of another. A prison theatre program called “Shakespeare Behind Bars” has found great success with their efforts to help incarcerated people put on Shakespeare productions and, in so doing, gaining valuable experience in making sound moral judgments. “[A]esthetic play,” Karen Davis argues in her dissertation on the program, “supports moral life.”³⁶⁵ She understands aesthetic play through the heritage of Kant’s aesthetics and suggests that the free play of reason and imagination helps us learn to accommodate both universality and particularity in moral judgements. This is because, “for Kant, aesthetic judging is analogous to moral judging, and so

³⁶⁵ Davis, Karen Eleanor. “Aesthetic Play as Ethical Practice: Rethinking Moral Life Through Kant, Schiller, Gadamer, and Prison Theatre”. Texas A&M University. 2017. p.ii

aesthetic experience is preparatory for moral life.”³⁶⁶ In addition, Schiller sees aesthetic play as unifying the rational aspect of being human with the sensuous aspect, “allowing us to realize the highest expressions of morality and freedom.”³⁶⁷ And finally, for Gadamer,

...aesthetic play models the way we engage with others in all contexts. Play means engaging with others, letting them ask questions and make demands, and responding by playing along. I suggest that these characterizations of aesthetic play model a view of moral life that resists instrumentalization.³⁶⁸

Davis thus argues that aesthetic play helps the prisoners “reimagine ethical life and cultivates [their] capacities for good judgment, interpretation, genuine listening, and practical wisdom in responding to a changing situation—the very moral aptitudes that calculative moral reasoning suppresses.”³⁶⁹ The success of the Shakespeare Behind Bars program, she concludes, demonstrates the union of the ethical and the aesthetic in a practical way.

Understanding ethical life through the lens of aesthetic play, as the SBB program does, teaches us how focusing on interpretation, good judgment, and practical wisdom can uphold ethical interactions with more humanity and caring than a calculating clockwork system that attempts to maintain a simple mathematical balance between harms and goods. The example of SBB shows us a way to rehabilitate an understanding of ethical life that is a humane alternative to clockwork morality... This aesthetic play cultivates our attunement to ambiguity and rehabilitates our aptitude for judgment, practical wisdom, and interpretation, the very elements of human life that clockwork morality would have us reduce out of the equation.³⁷⁰

Thus, just as participation in organized sports can help develop ethical thinking in its participants, so too can participation in theatre for many of the same reasons. Participating in a play aesthetics can thus be the vehicle for a personal transformation that “broadens ethical

³⁶⁶ Davis. p.ii

³⁶⁷ Davis. ii.

³⁶⁸ Davis. ii.

³⁶⁹ Davis. iii.

³⁷⁰ Davis. p.228-229.

horizons and cultivates ethical aptitudes such as interpretation, judgment and practical wisdom, and responsiveness to others in a changing situation.”³⁷¹

7.4 Concluding remarks on the Aesthetic and Ethical Dimension of Play

I have explored the relationships between three concepts – art and play, ethics and play, and art and ethics together through the lens of play. There is an aesthetic to play – beyond the craft of a game’s visual and auditory elements, which certainly involve artistic elements, and the way artists sometimes use play in the creation of their art, the system of interactions that govern the game-state and the set of constraints that guide player behavior can also be a source of aesthetic pleasure. Games can utilize this fact to express profound ideas through their systems of rules and the particular forms the player encounters during the course of play – games are interactive art *par excellence* and some games take full advantage of that fact to express deep concepts in a fun and engaging way. Certainly, like films, many games fall short of this artistic potential, either from a botched development process or created merely as a commercial enterprise with little care as to the quality of the product. But as game designers develop the language and tools to talk about play in terms of their aesthetic, more and more commercial games are able to evoke emotional and intellectual experiences, not to mention art games which set out to provoke primarily as works of art, divorced from the capitalist motives behind the development of most games.

Beyond their status as art, play activities have a certain beauty to their execution. While artistic efforts are very much curated experiences, the beauty of play adheres to it naturally. In the same way a mathematical equation or a stunning waterfall can instill in us a disinterested

³⁷¹ Davis, p.1-2.

appreciation for its elegance and beauty, so too can a good game of chess or baseball or a brilliant theatre performance. Because of this potential for beauty and grace, a particularly ugly game leaves us upset, disgusted, or depressed. We respond to these sorts of play activities – where there is cheating or simply a boring, one-sided contest – with emotion reactions, similar to our reactions to immoral or unethical behavior.

In this way, play also carries with it an ethical dimension. We *feel good* when a game is particularly close or well-played – the best players become heroes, and if they fail to live up to our expectations of virtuous exemplars, it hits us like a physical force. Even if these expectations are unfair or unwarranted, we nonetheless assign great moral worth to play activities. Some define play based on its system of rules, and because following those rules is what it means to play that game, breaking those rules means one isn't really playing that game. Because one must enter into a play activity freely and treat its rules – written and unwritten – as absolute, play is inherently ethically charged. Sportsmanship teaches us how to work as part of a team, how to treat others with due respect, and how to dedicate oneself to the mastery of a skillset; gamesmanship teaches us how to focus on particular outcomes and navigate a complex web of expectations and behaviors to successfully accomplish one's goals without breaking those rules. Just as it is in the animal kingdom, the main lessons of play are social ones.

Just as many philosophers combine aesthetics with ethics, play sees this union often. For the same reasons a game has an aesthetic dimension (beauty of form, voluntary participation, creative expression), so too does it have an ethical dimension (absolute rules, written and unwritten) – play is “pure” in this way, and according to those who believe there is an aesthetic answer to the ethical question, ‘what ought one do?’, that answer is often ‘play.’ Be it the

childlike creativity and freedom of play or the lessons games can teach us about our own behavior, ethics and aesthetics are united in play.

CHAPTER 8. NÓMOS – PLAY AND CULTURE

“Culture arises and unfolds in and as play.” – Johan Huizinga

In this chapter, I will revisit a claim by John Huizinga, the grandfather of game studies, that play is intimately tied to the development and expression of culture writ large. I want to examine Huizinga’s conviction using several theoretical concepts developed in 1972 and 1987 by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their two-part philosophical enterprise under the title *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. The concept of a **rhizome** will help conceptualize the nature of play as a multiplicity, rather than a single subject or unity; the concept of **desiring-production** will help conceptualize the productive, generative aspect of our instinct for play; the concept of **antiproduction** will help explain the process by which the State-form represses and redirects productive flows within a society; finally, the process by which culture is cultivated in and through play will be explained in terms of the **inscription of axioms on the Socius over time**, a complicated concept involving the creation and institutionalization of transcendental, representational principles in order to code and recode the flows of desiring-production into a form that can be moderated and controlled by society. By tracing this line of thought from the way play is pursued naturally in a society to its axiomatical representation in language and thought by the State-form, I will shed light on the relationship between play and culture – a relationship that Huizinga intuited in *Homo Ludens* nearly 40 years before Deleuze and Guattari developed the philosophical theories in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* which will help explain *why* and *how* play in society cultivates culture.

8.1 Play and Culture in *Homo Ludens*

In Johan Huizinga's seminal book *Homo Ludens*, which arguably marked the beginning the academic study of play in the 20th century, he attempts to express to readers a novel insight he developed over his years of studying historical material cultural artifacts. A historian, Huizinga had developed this "conviction [which] has grown upon [him] that civilization arises and unfolds in and as play" after studying toys and other material culture in the context of historical artifacts for many years.³⁷² However, he was unable to describe (and therefore uninterested in describing) a deep account of the process by which play begets culture. Instead, he focused his attention to the forms of play which manifest in and as culture.

Despite a number of problems that undercut his argument – that "pure play" excludes games of chance, that modern forms of play are "puerile" and less valuable to culture than ancient forms, that play activities require an absolute "magic circle" which serves as a barrier between the rules of the game and the rules of "serious" life – his remarkable intuition about play and culture as deeply intertwined looks more and more accurate as play theory has, over the past 80 years, resulted in a clearer sense of the social element of how play happens. Roger Caillois writes of Huizinga,

[*Homo Ludens*], although most of its premises are debatable, is nonetheless capable of opening extremely fruitful avenues to research and reflection. In any case, it is permanently to J. Huizinga's credit that he has masterfully analyzed several of the fundamental characteristics of play and has demonstrated the importance of its role in the very development of civilization.³⁷³

In this chapter, I offer a detailed account of the relationship between play and culture, including the mechanisms and social forces involved in the workings of that relationship. I'm not

³⁷² Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Martino Publishing. Mansfield Centre, CT. 2014. Originally published in 1938. p.ix.

³⁷³ Caillois, Roger. Trans. Meyer Barash. *Man, Play, and Games*. University of Illinois Press. Champaign, IL. 2001. p.3.

arguing that Huizinga's intuition was absolutely correct; rather, I'm interested in developing a theoretical understanding of how play cultivates culture in a society over time, which is what Huizinga recognized in *Homo Ludens* but did not explain. Using theories on social and political philosophy developed since *Homo Ludens* was published in 1938 can help fill in the details. Specifically, I will be drawing from the theories developed later by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which provides a number of novel concepts that I believe will help explicate the relationship between play and culture.

Play itself was not the focus for Deleuze and Guattari³⁷⁴ – the philosopher-psychologist duo was initially interested in an empirical materialist revision of Freud via Marx that gave less attention to the idea of individual identities and focused instead on multiplicities, constantly interconnecting and coupling in unexpected ways. However, as Deleuze believed philosophy was primarily about the creation of useful concepts, they developed their ideas in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* with the hope that others would use them to explore other theories and ideas. Therefore, my appropriation of their philosophical concepts to elucidate the relationship between play and culture is very much in the spirit of their schizoanalytic project. In fact, because *A Thousand Plateaus* is especially concerned with the creation and dissemination of social formations composed of, in, and against the State, applying their sociopsychological concepts to the process of society cultivating itself through play is really a lateral move, existing just adjacent to Deleuze and Guattari's primary topics in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

³⁷⁴ Although play features prominently in Deleuze's other works and overall philosophical mode of thought, it appears only a few times in his collaboration with Felix Guattari.

8.2 From Genes to Memes

As described in this dissertation, nature has instilled within us (and many of our animal cousins) a psychological need for mental stimulation – call it **entertainment**. The pleasure or mirth we feel from engagements with interesting qualities is called **fun**, which drives us to seek out this stimulation. Instinctually, we often enter an experimental mode or approach which can yield fun through our creative interactions within given, sometimes arbitrary, boundaries, or through the creative interactions of others. In addition, just as sexual desire drives the mating process and hunger drives animals to find and devour food, **boredom** – a negative, disconcerting lack of entertainment – also serves to drive humans to play.³⁷⁵

The *evolutionary* reason for this physiological need for entertainment is to promote experimental learning and social intelligence – to the extent these qualities are vital to the survival of a species, so, too, can play be seen in that species' typical behavior – but just as with food and cuisine or sex and romantic behaviors, the actual behaviors these needs produce in humans vary widely and are rarely straightforward or simple. Our capacity for complex abstract thinking, our intricate social formations, and our ability to inscribe our behaviors and beliefs for the benefit (or detriment) of our descendants mean our desire-based behaviors build upon themselves, forming traditions and often reaching a pinnacle of technique and efficiency. Compare the seemingly infinite variety of cuisine styles and traditions to the seemingly simple desire for food and you can get an idea of the incredible multiplying effect our social memory

³⁷⁵ It must be noted, however, that, just as I may eat even when I am not hungry or flirt despite being married, so too can I play even when I am not bored. Furthermore, I could cook a delicious meal for others without eating any of it myself. I can even cook a delicious meal for others who are not currently hungry themselves! It is not the case, then, that *my hunger* or *their hunger* motivates my cooking, but rather it is the *general problem of hunger* which has led to the development of the institution of cooking in which I am now participating. Thus, to say “hunger is why we eat” or “cooking was developed because of hunger” is true in the general sense without being necessary in every possible instance of eating. In the same way, to say “boredom drives play” does not mean boredom is required in every instance of play behavior. Just as cooking exists to satisfy hunger *in general*, play behaviors exist to satisfy boredom *in general*, but the relationship between play and boredom is not always 1:1.

has to expand our pursuit of instinctual pleasures into a library of styles and traditions. This shared history of behaviors is the result of societal axioms building up over time. This kind of memetic evolution – seen throughout Part Two of this dissertation – can be explained through several philosophical concepts developed in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

8.3 Play as a Rhizome, a Multiplicity

The social dimension of play is best understood as a multiplicity or **rhizome** (rather than a unity or individual subject) since the rules or laws which govern its existence continuously adapt to incorporate other multiplicities.³⁷⁶ Deleuze and Guattari developed their concept of a rhizomatic model in opposition to the traditional arborescent model of thought. They argue that all of Western thought is arborescent, using a tree as a model. In this model, thoughts sprout from a single origin point, like a tree from a seed, branching up and out. In this humanist way of thinking, thinking begins with the principle of identity – accordingly, the world can thus be accurately represented or reflected through language, art, science, etc. Deleuze and Guattari, however, prefer the principle of difference as the basis for thought processes, and their model uses a rhizome in place of a tree. A rhizome is a root-like plant that grows horizontally, like potatoes or weeds. The rhizome is thus the symbol of the multiple. As a rhizome has no center, it

³⁷⁶ Consider “pungent” food. Often colloquially called “hot” or “spicy,” scientists use the term “pungency” to avoid the ambiguity between temperature or the presence of spices, neither of which are necessarily chemesthesis. The burning sensation people and animals sometimes enjoy in their food is neither a taste nor a smell, but rather a tactile sensation. Plants like chili peppers evolved capsaicin – an antifungal preservation that is the source of the characteristic burning sensation of pungent plants – in part to discourage mammals from eating them, since, unlike birds, mammals ate the seeds or otherwise failed to spread the seeds around properly. Birds lack the mucus membrane which causes capsaicin to produce the pungent burning sensation. However, like Deleuze and Guattari’s example of the wasp and the flower, multiplicities sometimes connect to other rhizomes in unexpected ways. Some mammals (interestingly, on a creature-by-creature basis, rather than species-by-species) *enjoy* the chemical reaction caused by capsaicin – it is interesting, novel, or, in another word, *fun* to eat. Pungent peppers were domesticated more than 6,000 years ago in Mexico. (“Birthplace of the domesticated chili pepper identified in Mexico”. Eurekalert. 4/ 21/2014. <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/866060> Retrieved 10/14/2021).

spreads continuously without beginning or end and can connection to other rhizomes, which are themselves made of combinations of *other* rhizomes.

Three main principles explain the mechanisms behind a rhizome's growth. These are analogous to the way a multiplicity expands and branches off from any point to any other point:

1. "[The] principles of connection and heterogeneity [state that] any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be."³⁷⁷ Since the points of a rhizome are always "in the middle" – they are is always between something before and something after – Deleuze and Guattari call these points "plateaus." The rhizome continuously deterritorializes and reterritorializes into infinite plateaus, although a plateau cannot return to what precedes it. A plateau is always a point moving toward the next point, towards something new.
2. The principle of multiplicity states that "it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, 'multiplicity,' that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world."³⁷⁸ Multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature; the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows. In other words, while we usually think in terms of structuralist, rules-based units, multiplicities spread and connect to other multiplicities in non-centered structures.
3. "[The] principle of a signifying rupture [states that] ... a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new

³⁷⁷ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis, MN. 1987. p.7.

³⁷⁸ Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p.9.

lines.”³⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari offer ants as an example. “You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed.”³⁸⁰ A rhizome may deterritorialize in one place only to reterritorialize in another in a process of overcoding that, I argue, is fundamental to the social process that cultivates culture from human play activity, which I will explain below.

8.4 Representing the Multiple as a Unity through a Power Takeover

Much of the confusion surrounding the task of “defining play” can be explained by understanding play as a rhizome and attempts to define it as a power takeover – trying to represent a multiplicity as a single, unified subject. Since a rhizome connects to other multiplicities in new ways all the time, this process requires “cutting off” a chunk of the rhizome and demarcating it as the “subject” in question, ignoring the history of those connections and how they each changed or affected the rhizome as a whole.

Language provides an excellent example of this kind of power takeover. There is no true “unity of language” as language is rhizomatic. Even what we view as one specific language (English, German, etc.) is composed of these interconnecting multiplicities.

[T]he notion of unity appears only when there is a power takeover in the multiplicity or a corresponding subjectification proceeding... [a rhizome such as language] ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles... there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages... [We] can analyze language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence.”³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p.9.

³⁸⁰ Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p.9.

³⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p.8-9.

To talk about the “English language” is only a power takeover within what Deleuze and Guattari call a “political multiplicity:” “English” here may or may not include various accents and slang (do we include “ain’t” or “y’all” in the subject of “English?”), various ways of speaking in certain places at certain times (“Internet” is an English word only in the 20th century and beyond), and other arbitrations which limits the interconnected rhizomes to a certain, specific area and unifies that into the subject “English.” In order to truly analyze language, we must look at it rhizomatically, viewing it not simply as language, but as everything related to language: sign-language, body language, facial expressions, innuendo, accents, onomatopoeia, a made-up language known by only one person, computer code, color-coded traffic signs, etc.

Language is a multiplicity and connects to other multiplicities; *play is the same way*. We can see this throughout the history of the study of play. Huizinga, for example, did not include gambling in his view of play because he found it immoral. His power takeover did not include that multiplicity in the larger multiplicity he took as his subject of “play.” But this error is forgivable. Trying to perfectly “define play” in 1938 would be the equivalent of the Sisyphean task of “defining the Internet” with only specific websites as examples and no understanding of computer technology or the process by which those sites are stored and called up by client computers. Indeed, I am engaged in yet another power takeover of the rhizome of play as I write this, but it is my hope that this dissertation does not limit the rhizome of “play” to one specific area. My essential definition of play – cosmic play as a to-and-fro, as explained in Chapter 2 – is meant to allow play to continue to spread outside of itself. That is, my definition is fundamental and flexible enough that it can change and evolve along with its subject.

8.5 Play as a Flow of Desiring-Production; Antiproduction Appropriating those Flows

Like Freud, Deleuze and Guattari trace much of human behavior to the concept of desire, but where Freud saw desire as a motivating force originating in a perceived lack of something, a lack that demands to be filled, Deleuze and Guattari see desire in a different light. They argue that desire is a real (not representational), productive, explosive force. This makes their model of the unconscious more like a productive "factory" (as opposed to the Freudian model of the unconscious which they liken to a representational "theater"). That is to say, where Freud bases his theories on the principles of identity and representation, Deleuze and Guattari begin with the principles of multiplicity and difference.

Desiring-production is a flow which collects into mechanistic "desiring-machines," producing flows of desire from themselves and connecting to various other "machines." They can be thought of as circuit breakers in larger machinic "circuits" which are constantly connecting and uncoupling in new ways throughout the seemingly infinite plane of immanence we inhabit. The complex formations which result from these desiring-machines and their productive flows are multiplicities called "society" and the expression of those forces within a society can be called "culture." It isn't quite right to say desire flows from individuals to the collection of individuals that make up a society, for the authors would quickly point out that each person is already a multiplicity, no more or less singular than a society or a molecule. Rather, we use language and abstract thinking to represent a multiplicity as singular "thing."

In his Deleuzian analysis of the play concept in *The Play of the World*, James S. Hans notes that Deleuze and Guattari's project "returns human production to the realm of natural production where it belongs. The initial assumption of this model is that nature should not be

viewed as nature, but as a process of production.”³⁸² As Deleuze and Guattari put it in *Anti-Oedipus*,

[We] make no distinction between and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production or industry, just as they do within the life of man as a species. Industry is then no longer considered from the extrinsic point of view of utility, but rather from the point of view of its fundamental identity with nature as production of man and by man.³⁸³

Because everything humans do is caught up in production, it is important to look at production as a triple phenomenon,

Production is immediately consumption and a recording process (*enregistrement*), without any sort of mediation, and the recording process and consumption directly determine production, though they do so within the product process itself. Hence, everything is production: production of productions, of actions and of passions; production of recording processes, of distributions and of coordinates that serve as points of reference; productions of consumptions, of sensual pleasures, of anxieties, and of pain. Everything is production, since the recording processes are immediately consumed, immediately consumed, and these consumptions directly reproduced.³⁸⁴

Thus, production, consumption, and recording processes are all the same process. This describes “natural” processes as well as “human” production – the line between nature and culture is ephemeral and not always distinct. A force might cross from nature to culture or vice versa – thus humanism is replaced with a field of multiplicities all interacting together in various ways in the process of production. Hans correctly notes that “None of these production processes are discrete or homogenous; all are necessarily disparate and heterogeneous.”³⁸⁵ Hans emphasizes that play is “the most pertinent word to use in the context of all of the productive processes, precisely because it is the only word that adequately describes the entire process.”³⁸⁶

³⁸² Hans, James S. *The Play of the World*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst, MA. 1981. p.29.

³⁸³ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*. Trans. Mark Seem and Robert Hurley. Penguin Classics. New York, NY. 2009. Originally published 1972. p.4.

³⁸⁴ Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*. p.4.

³⁸⁵ Hans. p.30.

³⁸⁶ Hans. p.32.

It is reasonable to worry that this view of the play of the world destroys the concept of culture, since what is demarcated as “culture” is really just another part of nature, but Hans argues just the opposite:

Inasmuch as the best products of human culture have always been playful products and have always maintained their connection to the playful, it would be absurd to argue that culture ends with the understanding of playful production. It is true that the fields of culture come to be seen in a light which cannot always distinguish their lines of force from the lines of force of noncultural fields, but this is a necessary step in redefining the inherent connectedness of all fields of play. Culture is not a lesser thing because it connects and continually grafts itself onto the natural fields of play, but a greater thing, and all the greater for understanding that connectedness. Culture is an extension and an elaboration of natural fields and is thus as natural in that sense as is anything else. It merely marks out those spaces and those fields whose enregistering processes have specifically human locations, and for this reason it should be regarded as an important part of natural fields of play. Instead of eliminating culture, then, I am arguing that it is important, that once we understand its playful processes, we can expect more rather than less from culture. And that is a view which is most satisfying, particularly to the older sense of the word: we define culture once again as the cultivation of those fields of play within which we work out our lives, and we define the play of production as nothing more than a description of that cultivation and an affirmation of the activity which takes place within those fields we cultivate.³⁸⁷

In Hans’s view of production-as-play, he is using the cosmic definition of play, claiming that rocks and people “play” in the same way (though the latter is certainly more complex than the former). Just as natural, impersonal forces are engaged in the process of production, so too are they “playful.” The shift in complexity from rocks to people has much to do with people’s tendency to form societies, to institutionalize and regulate the flows involved in production.

People seek out food, sex, and entertainment (seeking fun, avoiding boredom) instinctually and place a high value on the pleasures they yield, which informs how their society operates. As Hans observes,

[S]ocieties produce themselves by territorializing flows within the world, by making their distributions serve the needs of those within the society. In other

³⁸⁷ Hans. p.200.

words, a society is a field of play itself, one which attempts to appropriate other fields of play for its own uses, much as man or any other animal appropriates food in order to produce and stay alive.³⁸⁸

The institutionalization of social memory involves the State-form (in whatever incarnation it chooses to incarnate) recoding those desires in terms of capital (pure value) so that it can better direct those flows of desiring-production to the State's benefit (i.e., taxes, social cohesion, repression of uncoded flows, etc.). To this end, the State attempts to inscribe the productive behavior upon the Socius in the form of representational axioms (a power takeover, a subjectification). This way, the productive behaviors come under control of the State and can be utilized by the State far more efficiently. Deleuze and Guattari call this process an "apparatus of capture" – the State-form is "a system that conditions its surroundings so as to perpetuate and enhance its own existence, bringing 'the outside' to 'the inside...'" [It] always appears as preaccomplished and self-presupposing."³⁸⁹ The best way to build itself up is to control the flows of production and direct them more efficiently.

For example, our desire for food leads us to eat – more specifically, the pleasure we feel when we eat leads us to *want* to eat, whether our survival depends on it or not. It just so happens that three meals a day seemed to work best in certain parts of the world, so the State-form may encode that behavior as "breakfast," "lunch," and "dinner." Workers and students, therefore, can be allowed a strictly demarcated "lunch-break" instead of individuals stopping to eat whenever they happen to get hungry or want to eat something yummy. The lunch-break axiom allows society to repress (and therefore, better control) the behavior of its workers and students, thus enhancing its own existence by controlling their productive energies. To continue with this example, certain foods are found to be best at certain meals – these associations are inscribed

³⁸⁸ Hans. p.141.

³⁸⁹ Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p.425-430.

upon the Socius as axioms like “waffles are a breakfast food” or “ice cream is not a breakfast food.” These demarcations are fluid, of course, and vary from one culture to the next. They aren’t “real” rules. Even within a single culture, this reterritorialization exists only on the social plane – consider the concepts of brunch, chicken-and-waffles, or a “healthy” fad of having steak for breakfast. They are exceptions to the “rules” of the axioms that this society happens to have inscribed. It is entirely possible, for example, to eat ice cream for breakfast – it’s not illegal; it’s just considered strange.

But when we move from the desire for food to the desire for play, the variety of behaviors increases exponentially. After all, while food needs to provide some nutrients and energy to work, nearly *anything* can produce fun if it is approached playfully, since the need for entertainment exists almost entirely in the mental sphere. It is more a psychological need than food, which certainly has a psychological component but is largely physiological. Thus, while something physical like running around playing tag can certainly be entertaining, so too can reading or talking with friends or daydreaming about being an astronaut. When the State attempts to inscribe play activities onto the Socius (in order to better control them), the range of axioms that are produced are staggering. The buildup of these axioms over generations as conceptual strata, like sediment, form what we call “culture” – the traditions and beliefs of a society.

What makes a particular play activity “useful” is also extremely varied, and the aspect of “fun” is not always readily apparent. Consider music. Somewhere along the way, society decided that a funeral dirge “felt right” for a burial ceremony, a national anthem “felt right” for inspiring feelings of patriotism and pride, and a cadence call “felt right” for a military parade. These examples are creative expressions of play that “felt right” for their respective ceremonies

because society recognized they had certain emotional or psychological properties that gave them a memetic advantage in those contexts. Many were created specifically to fulfill those roles. So, they were inscribed as axioms by the State-form and imbued with meaning beyond their entertainment value. Thus, though it would be rather strange to find a funeral dirge “fun,” there is little doubt that, like the pleasure of fun, hearing a funeral dirge feels good to those honoring the dead (and writing such a song involved creativity that may have come from play). The performance of that song has merely been appropriated to grab our attention, spur contemplation, and hold our interest in the ritual it represents, which happens to be for grieving. In this way, the State-form “guides production despite its apparent rejection of utility” with “antiproduction”: religion (the sacred), the State (the king), or fashion trends (mollified desire) are good examples of how the apparatus of the State-form subjectifies multiplicities into unities through power takeovers.

8.6 Recap on the Linguistic Problem of Play

This process of antiproduction – wherein the State-form attempts to control the flow of desiring-production of a repeated play activity by inscribing those activities as representational axioms on the Socius – affords us an explanation to the “linguistic problem of play” we encountered earlier in this dissertation. To wit: it is a point of confusion among those who would formulate a definition for play that, linguistically, one is said to “play a trumpet” or “play football” regardless of whether a given individual is actually experiencing fun while performing those activities. In other words, to “do” the trumpet is always called “play,” which leads to the mistaken belief that some activities are categorically play activities, rather than play being a mode or approach that can be applied to any activity at various intensities.

The source of this linguistic problem can be traced back to the State-form's axiomatic apparatus. To greatly simplify the situation: the form of "trumpet-use" is a representational interpretation of the activity because the axioms regarding it are necessarily abstract ideas – an "image" of trumpet-playing, if you will. Because using a trumpet well is often playful – that is, over time "we" (the society) have come to expect the most entertaining trumpet playing to have a high intensity of play involved – the State-form inscribes the axiom of "trumpeting" simply as "playing the trumpet." With hundreds of axioms regarding how "we" view trumpet-use, the State-form is able to repress, redirect, and thus harness the flows of desiring-production emanating from trumpet players. It can then make use of that desiring-production the way a dam makes use of the flow of a river or a windmill makes use of the wind. When we go to hear a professional trumpet player perform, we expect it to be entertaining – in other words, we can expect his or her performance to be playful and, thus, fun or pleasingly interesting. Of course, we pay a cover charge to enter and buy drinks while we're there, with a cut of that money going to the State as tax, where it can reapply that capital elsewhere. The axioms which yield a tax for the State persist while others die away, and we are left with the linguistic quirk of always referring to trumpeting as "play." After all, it is certainly conceivable that a trumpet player "plays" a song without actually being playful about it at all. But the combination of the axioms inscribed upon the Socius regarding trumpeting and the to-and-fro of the trumpeter's fingers result in our using the word "play" for all trumpeting.

8.7 Huizinga's Claim in Hindsight

As axioms are written, generations pass, and conceptual strata build up into cultures, memetic evolution sees some memes survive and others die out (perhaps to return later) because the good-making properties of an idea can be transmitted through social memory much faster

than genetics can be transmitted through reproduction. This brings me back to Huizinga and his conviction about culture originating in and existing as play. It is the shift from the genetic instinctual needs of individuals to the memetic development of concepts shaped by social forces that moves us, ultimately, from animal play to human culture. Huizinga intuited this shift decades before the word “meme” would be coined – “In tackling the problem of play as a function of culture proper and not as it appears in the life of the animal or the child, we begin where biology and psychology leave off.”³⁹⁰ Furthermore, though Huizinga oversimplifies some things (such as his insufficient examination of chance and gambling) and had no access to the biological and theoretical developments that would only come later in the 20th century to explain exactly *how* and *why*, he is absolutely correct when he posits “that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it.”³⁹¹ Given what we have said about the socio-historical strata which build up as a result of people’s pursuit of fun through play, we can understand what might have led Huizinga’s conviction that play precedes and underpins all of human civilization, even though we have only recently been equipped to understand the *how* and *why*.

³⁹⁰ Huizinga. p.3-4.

³⁹¹ Huizinga. p.173.

CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION

9.1 Overview

In this treatise, I have endeavored to develop a fuller image of play by offering a two-fold account of play – Part One (chapters 2 and 3) presents a genetic account of animal play as a subset of cosmic play and Part Two (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) presents a memetic account of animal play, specifically human play. The genetic account begins with a definition of play – I arrive at two definitions, in fact: the essential definition of cosmic play as a free to-and-fro movement within a bounded space; and the definition of animal play, which is voluntary, imaginary, and distinct from ordinary life and projects an order onto reality from the minds of the players. Part One concludes with an account of the origins of animal play in instinct. This moves us onwards and upwards into the memetic account, where I am primarily interested in the unique qualities of personal, human play in five spheres of human activity. After discussing how the play concept has been utilized by philosophers, I then looked at our phenomenological experience of play, the relation between play and reason, the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of play, and the role play has in the generation of culture. The goal of this structure is to follow how play is tied up in each of these escalating topics – moving from the most immediate and fundamental to the most advanced and sophisticated – in order to show the most important aspects of play and to reevaluate the significance of play in our lives. Each of these chapters looked at how play effects that topic and how that topic informs play.

9.2 Summary of Major Results

In Chapter 2, *Glóssa*, I presented a short explanation of the history of the modern study of play – which I categorize into three successive waves - and set about the task of finding a

satisfactory essential definition of play to use for the rest of the dissertation. I make a distinction between impersonal, cosmic play and personal or animal play – the former being the essential, physical concept and the latter being the subset of cosmic play that has several unique aspects to it, as animal play features a mental dimension. After reviewing some proposed definitions of “play” (and of other, related concepts like “game” and “fun”), I concluded that the best, most essential definition of play describes cosmic play as “free movement within a more rigid structure”³⁹² or as an event involving rapid “to-and-fro movement.”³⁹³ It is worth noting that play is a rhizome, liable to form new connections from any already existing point. Thus, defining play based on examples of play is very difficult, since nearly anything *can be* play – this confusion has led to many incomplete attempts to provide an essential definition of play. Another nonessential but still important definition is that of human play, which I define as a 1) free and voluntary 2) imaginary situation distinct from ordinary life that 3) creates or projects an absolute sense of order to reality 4) from the minds of the players.

In Chapter 3, *Phýsis*, I examined how cosmic play gives rise to animal or personal play through the two-fold instinct some animals have for fun (positive motivation) and boredom (negative motivation). This instinct moves us from the genetic account of play into the memetic account of play, since we are adding the minds of players to the picture of play. I explored how animal play involves many related concepts like creativity (in the form of *bricolage*), sport, entertainment, and honor.

In Chapter 4, *Sophia*, I traced the history of how the play concept has been used by philosophers. Beginning in Ancient Greece, play was already being used in two very different ways. Plato and Aristotle saw play as childish and only useful in its role in teaching the youth

³⁹² Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press. 2003. p.300.

³⁹³ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Wahrheit und Methode*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 1960. p.107.

proper values. This perspective continued on through the Middle Ages. There were also some Presocratics, notably Heraclitus, who celebrated play for its very irrational and innocent qualities and who saw the constant turmoil of physical forces in the world as divine play. Following Mihai Spairosu, I marked Friedrich Schiller as the first modern philosopher to place a high degree of importance to the play concept, and Friedrich Nietzsche as the philosopher who resurrected the Presocratic view of play, a highly influential turn in the discourse that saw human play elevated by its relation to cosmic play. Nietzsche should thus be seen as the turning point where the play concept changed from being unimportant (in Kant) and subordinated to reason (in Schiller) to being lauded as the chief organizing principle of the world, as Heraclitus once wrote of it., I presented the way the play concept was used by a line of philosophers following in Nietzsche's wake who Spairosu calls "artist-metaphysicians," a group of thinkers which includes Heidegger, Fink, Gadamer, Derrida, Deleuze, and Hans (the last of whom I have added to the list), all of whom give prerational play a privileged place in their philosophical systems. They value human play for its connection back to cosmic play, with themes of creating and destroying in innocence, autotelicity, and the freedom to create new things.

I examined the phenomenology of play in Chapter 5, *Óntōs*, which describes the human experience of play and is thus the first sphere of human activity on our journey of increasing complexity. I noted that human play, unlike the play of other animals, often involves *conceptual* to and fro – not merely physical movements but a play of concepts and ideas. Our situatedness is vital to this conceptual oscillation, and human play is experienced as part of our engagement with the world. As mental events, human play occurs at the site of disclosure, Dasein, and appears as a mood that colors how the play appears to the player. I presented a brief account of the theory of psychological flow, as laid out by Csíkszentmihályi, which describes a common

state of mind achieved through focused play. Then I looked at the work of Eugen Fink, who described the worldliness of the world as being similar to the make-believe world created by play – a semi-world that is both real and unreal. This irreality can be the imaginative role-play of children or the score of a baseball game – our thoughts of them are real, even if they are not.

I looked at three ways play involves knowledge and the faculty of reason in Chapter 6, *Lógos*: how we learn through play, the evoking of fun from play's unpredictability, and the concept of strategy or optimization in play. As children, like other animals with the instinct for play, we are driven to play in order to experience the pleasure of fun, and through this mechanism we learn about our bodies and minds and how to use them well. Play is how we come to understand the world around us. As we get older, our play becomes more focused on rules, though that childlike creativity is still present. Fun originates from the unpredictability of play, whether that predictive dimension is the uncertainty of waiting for the punchline to a joke, the roll of a die, or the not-knowing of what the other players are planning, play involves an epistemic element. We see this element of unpredictability in the divinatory practices found in every culture and in the design of casino games. Finally, I talked about the role of logic and reason in maximizing one's gamesmanship – human play often involves systems of varying complexity that we engage with as players, tinkering with how those systems operate and optimizing the results as much as possible. Optimizing one's play strategy is the prime activity of higher-order play, as described in game theory. Overall, I argued that play has an epistemic and rational dimension to it that ties into our lives from beginning to end: play is there from how we develop mentally and physically as children to how we wage war or operate a business.

In Chapter 7, *Ethos*, I explored the relationships between three concepts: art, ethics, and play. First, I looked at the oft-visited connection between art and play, noting play's role in the

creation of art but also noting the aesthetic quality of the play experience itself. Interactive art is always a play experience, and some games use this structure to present complex ideas through the player's interaction with the game's systems. Then I looked at the ethical dimension of play. Well-played games give us a good feeling, and as a society we often view great players are great people (with a significant sting if the players in question fail to live up to our hero worship). Play is more profoundly ethical in another way: sportsmanship teaches us how to work as part of a team and of the value of cooperation, dedication, and obeying a code of honor. On the other hand, gamesmanship teaches us how to accomplish our goals without breaking the letter of the law. For these reasons, adolescent sports-playing is often seen as a positive influence on the youths at play. I then looked at the ways some philosophers have answered the ethical question of "what ought one do?" with an aesthetic answer: "play." Play sits at this crossroads of value-making, and thus is often seen as something pure. Lastly, I presented a study on the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program as an example of how it is possible to create a practical ethics through aesthetics, offering some further evidence that the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of play are more intertwined than is often thought.

At the culmination of our journey in Chapter 8, *Nomos*, I revisited the claim by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* that all culture – from religious rituals and holidays to culinary and literary traditions – comes from play activity. I reexamined Huizinga's argument and apply several theoretical concepts from Deleuze and Guattari to better elucidate Huizinga's claim. I noted that play appears to be a rhizome, a multiplicity; this helps explain why play is sometimes so difficult to define and talk about, despite its ubiquity. I recoded our animal instinct for play in terms of desiring-production to better describe how our generative and productive nature finds a home in play activity. I then turned to the concept of antiproduction to describe the process by which the

State represses and redirects productive flows within a society. Then I presented a picture of the process by which culture is cultivated in and through play in terms of the inscription of axioms on the Socius over time. The activity of these redirected flows builds up strata over time; those strata are culture. This process is what institutionalizes some play activities as traditions and discards others that do not affect the flow of value within the society. Finally, I reaffirm Huizinga's original claim that culture does indeed come from play. His accuracy in this matter does him credit, considering he was writing several decades before Deleuze and Guittari would create the concepts I have used here to support his claim.

9.3 Looking forward

There are several ways one could further develop the ideas presented in this treatise. Future play theorists could widen any of the topics covered in chapters 4 (the play concept in philosophy), 5 (the phenomenology of play), 6 (play and reason), 7 (ethics and aesthetics of play), and 8 (play and culture), as there are many relevant persons and works I encountered but did not include – in the interest of accessibility and length, I included only what I felt was essential to building a theoretical foundation for future thinkers to build on. For example, there are three excellent collections on the philosophy of play edited by Wendy Russell, Emily Ryall, and Malcolm MacLean that contain chapters on many play-related topics: *The Philosophy of Play* (2014), *Philosophical Perspectives on Play* (2017), and *The Philosophy of Play as Life* (2019), all published by Routledge.

Future play theorists could also go deeper on many of the topics and thinkers covered in this treatise – despite his inclusion in multiple chapters of this dissertation, there is still more to be said on Nietzsche and play; for example, Lawrence M. Hinman's 1975 dissertation "Nietzsche's Philosophy of Play" at Loyola University Chicago. There is also still much more to

say about play in Gadamer, Fink, and Deleuze as well – I have presented only a fundamental groundwork for studying play in the works of each of these four philosophers. Finally, it is my hope that the theoretical foundation presented in this treatise sufficiently covers play's relation to each of these spheres of human activity so that future writers can focus on more specialized or specific topics related to play, be they in psychology, literature studies, game design, philosophy, or any other field.

Play is ubiquitous and powerful. It is – according to some like Johan Huizinga and James S. Hans – the primary organizing principle of the world. Others – like Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mihaly Csikszentmihályi – see play as the key to unlocking human flourishing. Play informs our situation as a mode of being in the world and teaches us how to engage with other beings we encounter in our time on this Earth. Play is an endless source of wonder and joy, inexhaustible and self-justifying. Play is fundamental to our development as human beings – physically, mentally, and even spiritually – and is a teacher that never runs out of lessons. Play is a rhizome, able to spontaneously expand into novel territory and tap into our powers of imagination. Historically, play has become increasingly prevalent and appreciated, and it will only grow more important and more sophisticated as time marches on. By understanding play, we can harness this power and allow it to better our world and ourselves.

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Master of Arts, Louisiana State University, May 2011
Thesis committee: Drs. Jon Cogburn, James Rocha, and Husain Sarkar.

Bachelor of Arts (Upper Division Honors), Louisiana State University,
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Major: English – Creative Writing; Minor: Philosophy

Areas of Expertise

19th and 20th century Continental philosophy, ethics, aesthetics

Theses and Publications

Master's Thesis: "Emotion and Rhetoric in *Bioshock*," Department of Philosophy, Louisiana State University. August 2011. This thesis examines the role emotion plays in practical moral reasoning and how this relationship is portrayed in the 2007 videogame *Bioshock*.

Undergraduate Honors Thesis: "All Too Human," Department of English, Louisiana State University. May 2009. This thesis is a collection of four short stories written to reflect different aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy – the Dionysian intoxication of art, perspectivism, his critique of Christianity, and the will to power.

Rose, J.L. 2010. "Technology as a Simulacrum of God in *White Noise*." In: Melissa A. Goldthwaite (editor), *The Norton Pocket Book of Writing by Students*. W. W. Norton & Company.

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Academic Experience

- 2014-2016 **Graduate Lab Assistant**, Purdue University Research Repository, Distributed Data Curation Center, Purdue Libraries
- 2013 **Presenter**, Office of Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs Spring Reception, “*An investigation into the status of videogames as art*”
- 2012-2013 **Teaching Assistant**, Brian Lamb School of Communication, Purdue University COM 114 – Presentational Speaking
- 2010-2011 **Teaching Assistant**, Department of Philosophy, LSU
Fall 2010: PHIL 1000 (Intro to Philosophy) and PHIL 2023 (Philosophy of Art)
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- 2005-2009 **Undergraduate Research Assistant**, Department of Political Science, LSU
Chancellor's Student Aid Scholarship.
Compiled survey data on political views and opinions for subsequent analysis.
- 2009-ongoing **Member of Phi Beta Kappa**
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