

What is Play?

In Search of a Universal Definition

By Gwen Gordon

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Summary

The ambiguous, variable, and paradoxical nature of the play concept is so widely accepted, that most play theorists consider the search for a universal definition to be pure folly. In engaging such folly, this article offers a post-rational definition of play within a broader framework that unites the paradoxes and inconsistencies associated with play. In doing so, it provides a lens through which we can appreciate the evolutionary, transformative nature of play as it exists at all scales of the cosmos.

“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 Fagen¹

Introduction

There are few subjects that have been poked and prodded by as many disciplines as play has. And, like the famous blind men describing their limited section of the elephant, each discipline has come to a different conclusion about the nature of play. The entertainment examined by scholars of leisure studies seems to be in an entirely different

universe from the imaginative play studied by developmental psychologists. While each discipline that studies play is searching for the truth, it inadvertently drafts the concept into the service of its own perspective at the expense of a full understanding and appreciation of play.ⁱⁱ

For decades starting in the late 18th century, evolutionary biologists and psychologists proposed only deterministic and utilitarian definitions of play. (Spencer, 1855; Groos, 1898,1901; Hall, 1906; Freud, 1959) In 1938, the Dutch anthropologist, John Huizinga (1950) presented a radically new understanding of play as an activity that exists only for its own sake. According to Huizinga, an activity is play if it is fully absorbing, includes elements of uncertainty, involves a sense of illusion or exaggeration, but most importantly, true play has to exist outside of ordinary life. That is, even though absorbed by the activity, the player is always conscious of the fact that the play is not real and that its consequences will not affect their lives outside the play.

While Huizinga's views have been significantly modified since 1938, most researchers still agree that play is intrinsically motivated and occurs in a "space" distinct from "reality". The tendency to narrowly circumscribe our notion of play around only those "meta-activities" that lie outside of "ordinary" life is unique to the West. In Hinduism, for example, play is an essential part of the cosmology, the play of Shakti and Shiva constituting and permeating all of existence. In such cultures, anthropologist David Handelman tells us, "Qualities of play are integral to the operation of the cosmos. To be in play is to reproduce the time and again the very premises that inform the existence of this kind of cosmos." (1992, p.12).

The mechanistic rational worldview we inherited and from which contemporary play theories have emerged does not tolerate the notion of playfulness, nor consciousness, for that matter, existing anywhere except in the minds of complex organisms. This narrow view is the result of a 2500 year battle between a pre-rational Dionysian understanding of play as the random, raw agonistic whim of the Gods, and a rational, orderly Appollonian view of play that leads to beauty and progressⁱⁱⁱ. Philosopher Mihai Spariosu (1989) provides a brilliant rendering of the interplay of these two schools of thought throughout Western history in his book *Dionysus Reborn*, warning that, though many philosophers have tried, we cannot have it both ways. Dionysus and Apollo will never play nicely in the same sandbox together.

But just as recent discoveries in physics have revealed a secret alliance between chaos and order from the broader perspective of complexity science, we might also find rational and pre-rational perspectives reconciled from a broader trans-rational view. Like play itself, a trans-rational perspective dwells in paradox. It is not, as one might suppose, a thinly veiled rational Hegelian synthesis, but the recognition of the validity of both non-rational and rational worldviews simultaneously.

For a single definition to meet the challenge of encompassing the full trans-rational paradox and variability of play, it must be as protean and flexible as play itself. It must articulate the structures underlying the full range of forms conventionally understood as play, including both competitive and cooperative games, solo and social play, skill based and fate based games, introverted and extroverted play, intrinsically and extrinsically motivated play, as well as rule based and rule breaking play. But it cannot stop there. It must also encompass the play from the scale of atoms to that of the cosmos as a whole,

without collapsing into generalities that fail to illuminate the central features that make games a special and heightened case.

If the universe is dead it cannot be playful. But if it is alive, it can be both lawful and playful. The two worldviews are not as polarized as they appear. Machines may not be playful, but play can be mechanical. In our search for a universal definition we are hoping to discern the laws that govern play at its deepest level and that permeate the universe while also taking into account the law-breaking character of play. Such a definition will not only illuminate the play concept, but may also reveal a dimension of the cosmos that neither a rational nor pre-rational worldview can hope to offer.

Defining Play

The preeminent contemporary play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) reminds us that an absolute definition for play at the level of cosmology and physics can never be proven scientifically (Sutton-Smith, 1997). And so, we are searching, instead for the metaphors that will open our imaginations to the full depth and breadth of the play concept. Sutton-Smith, after grappling with the elusiveness of play for over 200 pages in his illuminating book aptly titled, *The Ambiguity of Play*, gives us an excellent start in assembling the metaphors that can and have defined play. He finds that the dynamics of play and thus a definition broad enough to hold play's variability has to be rooted in the biological processes that give rise to the same kind of variability in nature. Sutton-Smith sites the work of evolution biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who claims that evolution is

determined by adaptive variability, characterized by “sloppiness, broad potential, quirkiness, unpredictability, and, above all, massive redundancy. The key is flexibility, not admirable precision.” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 221) Sutton-Smith finds a correspondence between the characteristics of play and each of Gould’s principles, stating that “if quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility are keys to evolution, then finding play to be itself quirky, redundant, and flexible certainly suggests that play may have a similar biological base.” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 222)

Sutton-Smith finds another biological correlation between the high potentiality with which play begins and that which distinguish the early stages of the development of the human brain. Play as novel adaptation corresponds to the evolutionary process itself. He defines play as a facsimilization of the “struggle for survival.” This “facsimilization,” claims Sutton-Smith, “increases the organism’s variability in the face of rigidifications.” (1997, p. 223).

While these correlations between play and fundamental biological processes do a great service in broadening our appreciation of play, as a definition it is both too vague and too restricted. Adaptive variability may be a product of play, but we then wonder what transpires in play that creates this variability? In addition, Sutton-Smith limits play to the behavior of “higher animals.” Instead of seeing mammalian play as a derivative of a core evolutionary process, perhaps it is an extension of these processes? Instead of a “survival strategy,” animal play may be the articulation and enhancement of the play that exists at the core of reality and human play may be its hominization, not facsimilization.

Enacting the fundamental dynamics of existence certainly is conducive to survival but that doesn't necessarily mean it is a survival strategy any more than growth is.

We need a deeper definition of play to understand its evolutionary nature. We also need a definition that sheds light on the sense of freedom and delight; in other words, the sheer playfulness of play. Susanna Millar, in her classic *The Psychology of Play*, goes as far as to suggest that “perhaps play is best used as an adverb; not as a name of a class of activities, nor as distinguished by the accompanying mood, but to describe how and under what conditions an action is performed” (1968, p. 21). This is not to project the capacity for attitude or intention onto subatomic particles, but to apply the insights we gain by understanding playfulness to the universe as a whole.

What's central to playfulness, says Millar, is “an attitude of throwing off constraint” (1968, p. 21). These constraints might be physical, emotional, social, or intellectual. Play detaches messages, experiences, or objects from their context of origin, creating a new frame that allows for greater freedom, interactivity, and creative possibilities. When we throw off the constraints of a given context, we are free to move, to engage with new contexts as well as to engage the context of our recent experience as an object of play.

Most work on play characterizes it as a set of features that shift the frame of activity from one domain to another through the meta-message that “this is play” (Bateson, 1972; Stewart, 1999). Generally this is meant as the shift from reality to a new play-specific space/time with its own rules of procedure. Playfulness is the attitude that

makes this shift possible. It enables us to step outside of and manipulate interpretive frames from the perspective of another frame.

There is a distinct intention that accompanies playfulness and which distinguishes the ecstatic boundary crossing of play from that of aggression and manipulation (the non-consensual crossing of external boundaries) or submission and collapse (the unintentional crossing of internal boundaries). We certainly know it when we feel it—a lightness of heart, a glint in the eye, alertness, enthusiasm, and readiness for surprise. There is a sense of involvement *and* detachment, self-expression *and* self-transcendence, individuality *and* cooperation. Boundaries become fluid, defenses dissolve, and physical, emotional, or mental movement becomes spontaneous, expanded, and well-coordinated. The considerable research on playfulness tells us that the traits of the playful include physical, cognitive, and social spontaneity, manifest joy, and a sense of humor (Barnett, 1998; Fein & Kinney, 1994; Singer, 1999; Lieberman 1965, 1966). Playfulness carries the presence, flexibility, and openness needed to improvise with and expand the stream of possibilities as they emerge in each moment.^{iv}

Freedom is a hallmark of play. As boundaries soften, not only does adaptive variability and potentiation increase, but the parts of the player become coordinated into spontaneous action. The autonomy of the parts is balanced by their integration with the play community. Playfulness entails spontaneous free harmonious movement within and among the parts of the player, whether the player is a chimpanzee, an amoeba, or a symphony orchestra. For “higher animals,” playfulness entails spontaneous free

movement within and among the parts of the self. It is the freedom of the total self to move as a whole in relationship to the total environment.

As theater luminary Viola Spolin explains,

In spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitation for the student to transcend himself or herself—he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure, and face all dangers unafraid...Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure (1963, p. 11).

Spolin captures the main elements of playfulness, its spontaneity, participation, intimacy, delight, flexibility, freedom, risk, and harmonious relationship of the parts with the whole. The spontaneity arises when we throw off the constraints both internally and externally that separate and suppress players.

Play's impulse toward both freedom and connection makes transformations possible. The transformations of play occur through interactions across boundaries in the back and forth movement of encounter and exchange that characterizes most of life, but which is heightened in play. Philosopher James Hans (1981) offers a description of play derived from Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic circle that builds on this theme. Along with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans tells us that the key move of the player is the leap out of the conventional frame of the self. The full absorption of a player in the play loosens the burden of being a discrete subject split from object and in this "ecstatic self-forgetfulness"

or self-transcendence both “subject” and “object” are inevitably changed. The players integrate these transformations in ways that expand and further their differentiation so they can once again act on and open into the playground. Both the players and the playground, the parts and the whole, are transformed, that is to say further differentiated and integrated through the communion of play.

Hans’ assertion raises many important questions: While play is generally characterized by the players’ full absorption in the activity, is it quite the metaphysical salve healing the subject/object split that Hans suggests? Does the subject have to dissolve entirely into the play for play to occur? What is the nature of the relationship among players? How is the absorption of play different from that of work or survival strategies? These questions suggest that there may be a more complex dynamic at work/play between the parts and the whole than for which Hans’ model accounts.

In his luminous and comprehensive work, *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler explores the nature of the creative act in ways that shed light on this dynamic (1964). He sees the central activity of creativity to be the meeting of previously separated associative frames and calls this encounter *bisociation*. According to Koestler, there are three ways in which *bisociation* can occur, each with a different effect. Associative frames can *collide* as in the case of comedy. They can temporarily *unite* in an aesthetic experience as they do with art. Or they can *fit together* into a new more comprehensive frame as they do with scientific discovery.

According to Koestler each mode of boundary play expresses a different relationship between the parts and the whole. In the comedic mode, the part asserts itself

over the whole with a laugh. Aesthetic innovation, on the other hand, is a self-transcending encounter between frames that creates a deep participation of the part with the whole such that the unity of the whole is revealed to the part (even if the part takes credit for the artwork). In scientific discovery, the “aha!” or “Eureka!” of discovery is part-centered, while the integration of the new knowledge affirms a new level of coherence between the parts and the whole. The *bisociative* act depends in various degrees on unconscious processes and imaginative leaps beyond the boundaries of routine thought. *Bisociation*, as Koestler defines it, is fundamental to play. Mammalian play *bisociates* between everyday life and the play space, whereas simpler forms of play *bisociate* solely between physical frames or, as Hans would call them, “centers of play.” Play, then involves the dance between parts and the whole where the part can assert itself over the whole (e.g., comedy), the whole can assert itself over the part (e.g., aesthetics), or the part and whole can strike a balance—a creative tension (e.g., scientific discover). Play in its best moments serves to transform both the parts and the whole in a participatory embrace that enacts new worlds and creates new boundaries and play spaces.

Since Plato (360 B.C.) first observed children and animals playing, the “leap” has been the central metaphor used to describe play. The image emphasizes the sense of exuberance and freedom at the center of play as well as its boundary crossing nature. We leap out of constraints in order to obtain freedom, we leap for joy to celebrate achieving freedom, and we leap across frames because we are free to explore. This exploratory drive is as fundamental to “higher animals” as the survival instinct (Koestler, 1964). In fact, play is defined in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd Edition

(1992) as the ability “to move or operate freely in a bounded space.” Most play is characterized as a particular kind of leap across boundaries into and between new frames, or to and fro between opposites. We even talk metaphorically about the play of opposites.

The space in-between opposite poles is the playground. Preeminent psychologist D.W. Winnicott (1971), in his classic, *Playing and Reality*, characterizes play in humans as the vital connection between self and world that involves full imaginative engagement between inner and outer life. Inhabiting this in-between space of play, which Winnicott calls the potential or transitional space is, according to the psychologist, the source of all creativity and health.

We cannot leap without a place to land. There would be no levity without gravity, no freedom without boundaries. The play leap is not merely the escape from bondage, but as Hans suggests, the freedom to participate fully in, to transform and be transformed by the world. In this way play is far from being a break from reality, but is the nature of reality itself in constant transformative engagement with itself. When we play we feel the intrinsic joy and vitality of participating in reality on its own terms, instead of trying to control and manipulate it to serve our needs. This participation may or may not give rise to innovations (it may just be a good romp) but it always generates more potential for play.

As our exploration illustrates, play has many irreducible features, some of which have been highlighted by different theorists. In light of this, a play definition needs to consider the quirkiness, redundancies, and flexibility that lead to adaptive variability, and

high potentiation. It needs to consider the to and fro movement of the hermeneutic circle in which the center of play is absorbed in the field of play and both are transformed. It must consider the nature of bisociative encounters which are either part-centered, whole centered, or balanced between the two. It must appreciate the “in between” play space in which play encounters take place. It must also consider the inviting, attentive, disarming attitude of playfulness, the intrinsic pleasure, as well as the freedom and cooperation essential to play. Rolling all these conditions together, we might begin to define play.

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.

Because our definition describes the mechanics of play and the relationship between players and playground, parts and the whole, we can easily test its veracity at many different scales. Let us consider a few examples:

- **Atomic play** - The paradox and potentiation of play, its flexibility and fluidity exist at the center of every atom. Each electron bisociates as both particle and wave and is influenced by the larger field of the observer (integration) to manifest in a particular location (differentiation).

- **Biological play** - The crossing of boundaries in sexual play is the bisociation of organisms, producing a new organism (differentiation) that is potentially better adapted to the environment (integration).
- **“Higher Animal” play** – The social play of mammals and some birds bisociates between the frames of what an action represents and what it does not represent (i.e. a play fight is both a fight and not a fight). Animals become fully absorbed in their play, exercising spontaneous and varied responses to unexpected stimuli (differentiation), while cooperating with, staying attuned to the rhythms, pain thresholds, and play styles of the playmates (integration). Developing flexibility and coordination in the face of surprise, increases the possibility for further play. (Beckoff, Spinka & Newberry, 2001)
- **Psychological play.** A painting is inspired by the interpenetration and bisociation of the outer and inner worlds of the artist uniting in an aesthetic experience (integration), through which the actual and the possible also bisociate. The artwork manifests through the manipulation of the paint, directed by the artist’s subjectivity (differentiation). A painting, like any symbol, bisociates between the object of art as symbol and the meaning it evokes.
- **Cultural play.** The celebration of a religious holiday bisociates between everyday reality and the sacred, as well as between the individual and community. It gathers community to perform ritual symbolic acts (bisociation) for the personal and universal/spiritual to interpenetrate, thus affirming the shared stories and meaning of community (differentiation) within the universe (integration).

- **Cosmic play.** Chaos and order are the fundamental frames that bisociate and generate novelty throughout the cosmos. Chaos breaks open the boundaries created by order so that frames spill into and bisociate with one another. A supernova explosion generates new molecules (differentiation), which make new forms (planets, life, etc.) possible, furthering the whole (integration). The “to and fro” movement of destruction and creation, attraction and aversion, contraction and expansion, rest and activity, structure and energy, is at the heart of cosmic play.

With this definition, we retain much of the understanding that contemporary researchers have regarding play’s absorbing, voluntary, and pleasurable nature. However, unlike the conventional understanding we do not define play to be outside of “real life” nor to be of purposeless intent. Instead, play is central to real life, even if it does provide a break for “higher players” from the habits and rigidities of ordinary consciousness. It is also highly purposeful, though usually not toward any explicit goals held by the players. Play’s purpose is to generate more possibilities for play.

This definition of play and the examples we use might also be true for the creative process in general. However, the core difference between creativity and play is that, while creativity produces artifacts, play produces possibilities. Play makes creativity possible while creativity manifests possibility into actuality. In other words, while creativity is based on play, play is not necessarily creative. Most games, for instance, entail far more redundancy than creativity. Children seem to enact the same make-believe tea party, or

vengeful monster scenes endlessly. It is, however, often from redundancy that novelty (eventually) emerges.

Our definition might become clearer still with a few examples of what is not play.

The most immediately distinctive features of play are the freedom it expresses and the agreements and cooperation among playmates. Play stops when participants are not free to play or not, become objects of play, or are unaware that they are involved in play. War, violent crime, and practical jokes may be play for the perpetrators, but it certainly is not for the victims. In this case the consensual nature of play is lacking. What might be a playmate is instead an object of play. Here we start to see the need for a developmental model for adult play that can account for the capacity for intersubjectivity as a function of maturity and increasing play capacity. For now, we need only understand that if we are not free to play or not play, we are not playing.

The freedom of play is absent in any activity that has become rigid, unconscious, habitual, or compulsive, even if it started out as play. We often see this with television watching, video game playing, gambling, or drug use. We also see it with the repetitive regressive “play” of trauma survivors which is either the routinized reenactments of the trauma or the play of the developmental stage arrested when the trauma occurred. The restless play of the forty year-old Puer Eterne is less an expression of the freedom associated with youth than the resistance to playing at new levels of development and complexity. The “kidults” or “rejuveniles,” who visit Disneyland regularly, collect Care Bears, and attend children’s concerts may be asserting their freedom by casting off the constraints of a work-obsessed culture. But they may also be holding onto the forms of

play of an earlier stage of development which was never played out. Play does not have to disappear with adulthood. It only diminishes when we resist adulthood and confuse our development with the increase in seriousness instead of the increase in dimensions of play.

The focus on accomplishing immediate instrumental objectives also blocks play. An activity also stops being play when it is driven by goals and inhibited by the fear of real life consequences. With all these examples, the freedom of play is lacking. Play occurs when the player is free from compulsion, and free to risk all the insults and injuries of full participation, such as losing, failing, and making a fool of himself.

As we define it, play is integral to an evolving cosmos. After all, no change can occur without the crossing of boundaries and the opening of players and playground to mutual influence. And, while some of these boundary crossings may appear rigidly rule-bound and mechanical, especially at the atomic, chemical, molecular, and genetic level, the degree of freedom, spontaneity, and playfulness increases with the increase in the complexity of the organism. The forms of play evolve in complexity in tandem with the forms at play. What we think of as playfulness in animals is actually the articulation and enhancement of the intrinsic playfulness of the cosmos.

While this is, indeed, a rule-bound universe, within the rules, as within any game, the play ensues. If the rules and order become too restrictive, trickster chaos stirs things up, disrupting the status quo, and revitalizing the play. Play requires both boundaries (order) and the impulse to cross them (chaos). When chaos and order are balanced we find highly sensitive, flexible, cosmic erogenous zones filled with exquisite play—dynamic

spiral galaxies that give birth to planets and planets in which liquid water offers the universal play bow to life, which responds by bursting into a billion forms of play. By offering a universal definition of play, we hope to not only expand our vision of the cosmos, building on without diminishing our scientific heritage, but also provide the basis for understanding the transformative powers of play at all scales of the universe.

Endnotes

ⁱ Fagen 1981, as cited in Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.2

ⁱⁱ Brian Sutton-Smith elaborates on the worldviews behind each play theory in *The Ambiguity of Play* (1998).

ⁱⁱⁱ The pre-rational play concept was articulated initially in Pre-Hellenic Greece and revived by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Hans Josef Gadamer. The rational play concept was articulated first by Plato, then later taken up by Kant, Schiller, Spencer, Groos, and Bateson. It is the predominant view.

^{iv} The theater improvisation expert, Sue Walden, teaches that the fundamental elements of play are presence, openness, and flexibility.

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