

Playstations. Or, Playing in Earnest

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It seems more than a little incongruous if not irresponsible to be proposing to devote so much time to the topic of play and the empire of the unserious, during a period in which the importance of being earnest is so evident and imperative (though when is it not?) Actually, though, the comically-accelerated history of play on which I am about to venture will try to suggest that modern culture has been formed in part by the effort to take play ever more seriously. I want in these opening remarks to develop a few generalisations and reflections that come out of the history of theories of play, as they have been developed in different places, by different kinds of discipline: anthropologists, psychologists, aesthetic philosophers and economists, as well as cultural historians and literary and art critics.

There are three broad propositions to which I will try to recruit you. The first is that there is a distinctively modern conception of play, formed from a configuration of law and freedom. Secondly, this conception of play powerfully informs a modern sense of the powers and limits of the human subject, especially as that subject is itself held to be formative of modernity. Thirdly, contemporary conditions of play have tended both to generalise it, removing it from its specialised place and function and dissolving the bond between play and the human. This should make us wonder what a general diffusion of play, throughout and beyond the sphere of human action, a play that no longer knows its place, might entail or portend.

In the autumn of 2004, the ICA was taken over by the German artist John Bock, who transformed the galleries into a fascinating labyrinth of mysterious rooms, buildings, ladders corridors and crawlspaces, for his show *Klutterkammer*. The show required a whole new protocol among its visitors, who had to become used not just to the odd accidental nudge from a fellow spectator, but to the rough and tumble social arrangements that most of us last experienced in the playground, taking turns on ladders, getting your nose bumped by a stranger's posterior as you scrambled through a narrow aperture. The show was described as treating the ICA galleries as 'an enormous thinking and play space'. Consciously or unconsciously, this formulation alludes (a word that has something of the ludic playing about it) to the words of one of the founders of the ICA in 1947, the art critic Herbert Read, who declared that the institution they had in mind would be

‘an adult play centre, a workshop where work is a joy’. (This prompted a Puritan response from Bernard Shaw, who wrote to protest that, if the ICA really wanted to improve social life, they should campaign for funds to improve health and sanitation.)

Play and Modernity

While most cultures occupy themselves with play, the preoccupation with the nature of play seems to be a defining feature of the kind of organised and integrated societies we have come to call modern. Modern attitudes towards play can find some support in ancient writings. ‘We are most nearly ourselves when we achieve the seriousness of the child at play’, we find among the statements attributed to Heraclitus. Plato too declared that ‘Life must be lived as play’. Aristotle comes closest of all classical writers to declaring that leisure is the purpose of life. But even in Aristotle, there is that curious solemnity, that intolerance of the unserious, that distinguishes classical from later thought. Aristotle quotes with approval the maxim of Anacharsis, ‘Play so that you may be serious.’ This remark may be distinguished from the principle of the seriousness of play itself. In general, classical thought thinks of play as something to be curbed, or tolerated, or directed, rather than as itself furnishing a principle of life, or forming a subject of attention in its own right.

This earnestness is inherited by the early Christians. Sobersides St John Chrysostomos follows St Paul in his dark admonitions against japing and jest: ‘The present is no season of loose merriment, but of mourning, of tribulation, and lamentation: and dost thou play the jester?’ he booms. And, in his sixth Homily on Matthew, he declares roundly:

But for all this, some are of so senseless a disposition, as even after these words to say, "Nay, far be it from me to weep at any time, but may God grant me to laugh and to play all my days." And what can be more childish than this mind? For it is not God that grants to play, but the devil. At least hear, what was the portion of them that played. "The people," it is said, "sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Such were they at Sodom, such were they at the time of the deluge. For touching them of Sodom likewise it is said, that "in pride, and in plenty, and in fullness of bread, they waxed wanton." And they who were in Noah's time, seeing the ark a preparing for so many years, lived on in senseless mirth, foreseeing nought of what was coming. For this cause also the flood came and swept them all away, and wrought in that instant the common shipwreck of the world.

We are accustomed, after the genealogies of festival of Bakhtin and others, to think of the medieval world as one which gave frolic and frivolity a

central place in the calendar. But it is striking that the medieval world, in which the occasions for feasting and fun multiplied so prolifically – one thinks of Breughel’s great compendium of children’s games, in his *Young People at Play* of 1560, which comes at the end of this period – should have paid so little attention to the theme of play in its thought. It was not until Rabelais or Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly* (1511) that something like a theory rather than merely a practice of the playful began to form, and not until the middle of the sixteenth century that the fool started to become a philosophical figure.

Nor, indeed, were philosophers of the Enlightenment, with a few notable exceptions such as Denis Diderot, much concerned with the nature of play. For the Enlightenment, what mattered most was irradiating the dubious murk of ignorance by the light of reason. To be enlightened was to have been emancipated from the slavery or childishness of credulity. To be sunk in ignorance or prejudice was to be in a state of delusion or illusion, words that indicate the operation of the ludicrous: to be il-luded is to be in the midst of a game of which you are not the knowing player.

The serious attention to play is a function of late Enlightenment, or early Romantic thought. The most important figures are of course, Kant and Schiller. In his *Critique of Judgement* of 1790, Kant emphasises the importance of a form of reflection exercised in the absence of rules or preexisting concepts. It is a form of judgement he calls aesthetic, and that would come to be associated with reflection on works of art, though this was not Kant’s exclusive focus. At the heart of Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement is the notion of the ‘free play’ of imagination and judgement:

The cognitive powers brought into play by this representation are here engaged in a free play, since no definite concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition. Hence the mental state in this representation must be one of a feeling of the free play of the powers of representation in a given representation for a cognition in general.

The real importance here lies in the word which modifies the notion of play. What matters for Kant is not so much the playfulness, as the freedom of nonconceptual thought. This thought is free, not because, as Aristotle and Aquinas feared, it was insubordinate or licentious, and therefore conduced to chaos, but because it was unconstrained by the cramping structures of human thought. This is a notion that would have had no meaning before the reflexive alertness to the nature of thinking itself which arose in and characterises the Enlightenment. If systematic doubt was the way in which the mind achieved access to itself for Descartes, for Kant it is free play that allows the mind to elude itself. It is this principle which Kant, which, with

his usual staggering presumption, offers as the proof of the universality of the judgements produced under such circumstances: ‘This state of free play of the cognitive faculties attending a representation by which an object is given must admit of universal communication’ (2, S. 9). The other important feature of this play of the imagination is its mobility: it is inconstant, regularly irregular, well expressed in the oscillations, or, as we say, the play of light and shadow:

beautiful objects have to be distinguished from beautiful views of objects (where the distance often prevents a clear perception). In the latter case, taste appears to fasten, not so much on what the imagination grasps in this field, as on the incentive it receives to indulge in poetic fiction, i.e., in the peculiar fancies with which the mind entertains itself as it is being continually stirred by the variety that strikes the eye. It is just as when we watch the changing shapes of the fire or of a rippling brook: neither of which are things of beauty, but they convey a charm to the imagination, because they sustain its free play.

‘The changing free play of sensations (which do not follow any preconceived plan) is always a source of gratification’, writes Kant. With Kant, play for the first time has become serious, and it is the taking seriously of play that draws the play principle close to art or the arts. Thus, we read in Book 2.51 that ‘Rhetoric is the art of transacting a serious business of the understanding as if it were a free play of the imagination; poetry that of conducting a free play of the imagination as if it were a serious business of the understanding’. The Kantian trust that merely removing or setting aside prejudice, freeing thought from the impediment of thought (which is, the thought of others), will lead to truth and justice, flows into Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, and thence into liberal theories of education that continue to prevail. What matters is the capacity for what Arnold called the ‘free disinterested play of thought’.

What we want is Hellenism, the letting our consciousness play freely and simply upon the facts before us, and listening to what it tells us of the intelligible law of things... the free spontaneous play of consciousness with which culture tries to float our stock habits of thinking and acting, is by its very nature, as has been said, disinterested.

Kant is followed by Schiller, who both formalises and develops the somewhat crude account of play to be found in Kant. Schiller sees what he calls the play-drive as a union of two other principles, the sensuous drive, and the formal drive. Where the sensuous drive attaches itself to mere

phenomenal change, and the formal drive conduces to inert forms governed by inflexible rules, the play principle brings about what Schiller calls 'living form' (*lebende Gestalt*), a notion that has had a distinguished career in aesthetics, though the conditions for living form have perhaps only come about in actuality more recently in live, digital, or virtual arts.

What joins Kant and Schiller, and runs through those who follow them, is an historically new conception of play, in which freedom and constraint uniquely, paradoxically cooperate. When one plays, one is free, and act of choosing to play is a free choice, and a choice of freedom. This principle of play is emphasised in nearly all theories of play from the early nineteenth century onwards. The first pages of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* articulate with admirable clarity the series of conjoined principles at work in play. When he says that play 'is free, is, in fact, freedom' (Huizinga 1949, 8), Huizinga runs together two senses of freedom. First of all, play is free, because it is freely chosen; you can only play if you don't have to. When in *Great Expectations* Miss Havisham instructs Pip to come to her house and commands him to play, Dickens is dramatising a definitional impossibility. If he obeys, he cannot be playing; if he plays, he cannot be wholly obedient. So in play, there is a freedom *to*. But there is also a freedom *from*, for play is also free in the sense of independent of purpose or interest: it is, to use the Kantian word Huizinga uses 'disinterested, because 'Not being "ordinary" life it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process. It interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there.' (Huizinga, 9)

And yet play is far from unregulated. This is in fact the new development in play philosophy that distinguishes it from the reflections on idleness, folly, frolic and lewdness (a word that derives from *ludere*) that had obtained for almost two thousand years, from the classical world onwards. Play is no longer conceived as formless effervescence. For play to be disinterested means for it to be set apart from ordinary life. What is more, this setting apart must be regulated, by boundaries, rules. The freedom of play must be policed. So play is not free in the medieval sense: it is free in the sense that it gives itself its own law.

These two aspects of play are cinched together neatly in Huizinga's summary of the formal characteristics 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 which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga 1949, 13)

Huizinga writes as though he is describing a set of conditions which are essential, unchanging and transhistorical. At this point we might usefully give ourselves leave to ask a meta-question about the idea of play. If play is free, gratuitous, undirected, autotelic, having its meaning purely and utterly in itself, then is the idea of the freedom of play itself similarly free or gratuitous? Why does this idea come to the fore at this moment? If it does not playfully bubble up out of nowhere, on what does this idea of the independence of play depend? What determines this conception of the act of play as a uniquely self-determining?

We are given a clue by the second chapter of *Tom Sawyer* (1876), which describes how Tom, wearily consigned to the task of whitewashing a fence, persuades his friends to do it for him and pay him for it too by representing the task as the most delicious fun. The episode ends with the following reflections:

If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. (Twain 1993, 23)

Now all human societies have been obliged to labour in order to subsist and reproduce themselves. But the revolutions, in scientific and technical understanding, in forms of government and in economic forms, which brought about the emergence of forms of modern society from the traditional forms of social arrangement that held good until the sixteenth century, also brought about a rationalisation of work. The effects of this were highly complex and mediated, but we can distinguish two principal transformations. The first was the growing demand for work-discipline, as brought about most notably in the invention of public time. In order to be conducted most efficiently, work had to be synchronised. Increasing efficiency, along with specialisation and coordination of labour, produced surplus, not only of goods, but also of time, though this surplus was not made available to all equally. Nevertheless, surplus is sufficiently diffused through the system to allow the formation of a notion that would have been largely unintelligible in the medieval world and previously, namely, the notion of 'free time', not in the sense of holiday, but in the sense of empty or unassigned time. The distinctively modern experience of boredom comes into being at the same historical moment. So the second effect of the

gradual extension of economic relations and work-disciplines, along with their subsidiary forms of abstract organisation, into more and more areas of the 'lifeworld' (the world of human life seems pompously to be meant in Habermas's phrase), was a drastic bifurcation of the fields of work and play. It was precisely because of the seemingly universal expansion of the conditions of work that play for the first time began to seem, not just irresponsible, but incongruous or enigmatic, and therefore to be credited with mysterious powers.

At the same time, the growing apprehension that there might be nothing that could resist being integrated into the work process and its associated structures and habits, began to produce a kind of protective idealisation, even a fetishisation, of the idea of play. In one sense, the world of play was a kind of accidental byproduct of the world of work. In another sense, it could begin to be seen as vestigial, all that was left of a fragile, vanishing world of spontaneous, unchecked, self-delighting impulse. It seemed to be imperative that the autonomy of play should be protected from all the forces that would take it captive and capitalise upon it. It is precisely at this point that the cult of the child, as the repository of all the powers of life, begins to form. The fact that the leisure and cultural industries have their beginnings in the late eighteenth century are a strong indication that these apprehensions about the fragility of the realm of play were well-founded. This accounts for the new element that I have suggested becomes part of the theory of play in industrial modernity. What matters is that it should preserve itself. How does it preserve itself from the encroaching, universal law of instrumentalisation? Through a higher law, the autarchic law of its own lawlessness. Play must become a self-regulating republic if its seriousness is to be sustained and its autonomy guaranteed from squalid getting and spending.

Thus the distinctively modern conception of play is as a form of legislated release, in which law and laughter are coiled tightly together. The vehicle of this new conception of play is the growing preoccupation with the joke, which depends, as Freud will demonstrate, upon an intricate engineering of coercion and release. There is comedy galore in the ancient and medieval worlds, and pages of learned foolery in the form of wit, but, I think, no real jokes until the late eighteenth century. Not that there are all that many jokes in Kant. Indeed, an essay bearing the title 'An Analysis of The Joke in Kant' would have to be understood entirely literally, for I believe there to be only one. I reproduce and briefly discuss The Joke in my essay 'Art, Criticism and Laughter' (1998).

There are two problems with the heightened lawfulness of conceptions of play. One is that it may seem to make play a mirror of the growing

regulatedness of what Weber would come to call the administered world, rather than being an alternative to it. The other is that the very emptiness or disinterestedness of play might provide the provocation or opportunity to put it to work, or make it earn its living like everything else. In the form of publically organised leisure, play becomes drawn into a rhythm of work and leisure which is the tempo of capitalism itself, and thus becomes part of the drilling of the modern subject, who is alternately screwed up into attentiveness and spasmodically released into vacant time, which must nevertheless also be seen as recreational, recreative.

It is not surprising that one effect of this, towards the end of the nineteenth century, with its growing fascination with thermodynamics and the social calculus of work, effort, outcome and fatigue, is to generate theories of play that are fundamentally economic. The most influential example of such a theory is that proposed by Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Sociology*. Spencer proposed that play comes about through an excess of energy, caused by the efficiencies of modern life, which do not require the full exertions required in other circumstances. An even more influential theory was developed in two books by Karl Groos, *The Play of Animals* (1898) and *The Play of Man* (1901), in both of which he argued in evolutionary terms for the function of play as preparation or training. Attempts to provide an evidential basis for this argument have been disappointing. It has not been easy to correlate improvements in hunting performance or other forms of survival skill with increased opportunities to play. On the other hand, the absence of opportunities to play among human children has been strongly correlated with serious forms of cognitive dysfunction and social maladjustment in later life. Shifted from the physiological to the cognitive and psychological domain, in the work of Klein, Piaget, Vygotsky and Winnicott, Gross's play-as-preparation theory has continued to compel assent.

From the nineteenth century onwards, the great antagonism in theories of play and leisure would be that between the assertion of the essential gratuity of play, and functionalist accounts which stress what play is contingently for. And this is because the discussion of play has become focussed on a particular area of human activity with which it had had previously only a loose association, principally through the idea of play-acting or theatrical mimesis, namely art. For, where Kant had focussed on particular forms of judgement or mental action in which play has a part, later thinkers took his notion of the aesthetic and restricted it to the world and the work of art. The invention of the idea of art and the aesthetic in its new meaning of 'having to do with art' and the insanely extravagant and utterly improbable claims that have been made ever since for art's unique power to civilise, teach, improve, sanctify, enliven, purify, preserve and transform human

society, have a great deal to do with the parallel development of the idea of play as free self-government that is so important a part of modernity.

Playing Man

Huizinga writes in the Foreword to his great 1938 work on the nature of play by proposing that ‘next to *Homo Faber*, and perhaps on the same level as *Homo Sapiens*, *Homo Ludens*, Man the Player, deserves a place in our nomenclature’. (Huizinga 1949, ix). Almost straight away, at the beginning of his book, Huizinga acknowledges the universality of play behaviour, insisting that ‘Animals play just like men’ and, more importantly, asserting that play comes before culture, not as a consequence of it (Huizinga 1949, 1). Nevertheless, his intention is to assert the inseparability of play and culture. In stating that ‘play is to be understood here not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon’ (Huizinga 1949, ix), Huizinga seems to be making some essential link between *homo* and *ludere*, offering some definition of man as the essentially playing animal, the animal to the being of whom play is of the essence. Such claims are not unique, though there is some sense in thinking of them as relatively new in historical terms. Here is Schiller’s formulation:

[H]ow can we speak of mere play, when we know that it is precisely play and play alone, which of all man’s states and conditions is the one which makes him whole and unfolds both sides of his nature at once?... 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. (Schiller 1967, 107).

For Schiller, play is necessary to the unfolding of man’s nature, precisely because, unlike the other animals, man is born incomplete, and in need of growth and fulfilment. The essence of man is that he is a work, or play in progress.

Sartre retains much of Schiller’s humanism, while mitigating the confidence in the possibility of being fully a man.

What is play indeed, if not an activity of which man is the first origin, for which man himself sets the rules, and which has no consequences except according to the rules posited? As soon as a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom, a freedom, by the way, which could just as well be [580-1] his anguish, then his activity is play. The first principle of play is man himself; through it he escapes his natural nature; he himself sets the value and rules for his acts and consents to play only according to the rules which he himself has established and defined. (Sartre 1969, 580-1)

It is precisely in the acceptance of the unfinished nature of man, of his gratuitousness rather than his necessity, that a human can become himself:

when a man is playing, bent on discovering himself as free in his very action, he certainly could not be concerned with possessing a being in the world. His goal, which he aims at through sports or pantomime or games, is to attain himself as a certain being, precisely the being which is in question in his being. (Sartre 1969, 581)

Others have emphasised the importance of play for man's self-determination which, means the capacity to forget his past. Where every other animal recapitulates its essence, which is to say its particular form of adaptation to its context, man has no specific niche, no prescribed form of being. His essence is to be able to adapt to all environments; his is therefore, as Michel Serres has recently put it, an 'incandescence', a white being, *esse-in-possesse* (2003). Where work fits man for the world, play, it seems, determines man's free and excursive being, in possibility. The essence of man to have no essence, or to be the kind of creature whose essence is essentially in play.

The tendency is to treat the capacity for play as unique to, or uniquely definitional of man. But this may not be sustainable. Konrad Lorenz observes that other animals have man's capacity to adapt to different environments:

The Raven can live just as well as a parasite of sea bird colonies in the north like a Skua, as a carrion-eater in the desert like a vulture, or as a hunter of small animals in Middle Europe. Into each habitat he fits as if he were specifically adapted for it...Besides the Raven, the Norwegian Rat and Man are the most striking examples of this kind. (quoted, Einon 1980, 31-2)

As Dorothy Einon observes, the animals singled out by Lorenz are all characterised by their unusual playfulness: ravens play more than other birds, and Norwegian rats more than other rodents. (Einon 1980, 32). We wait to hear from the Norwegian visitors to this summer school whether the sewers of Oslo indeed ring to the sound of rodent carousings. But this then raises a couple of questions. What if man is not uniquely playful, or uniquely self-defining in his play? The more examples of behaviour that is seemingly superfluous to existence one assembles, the more the idea of a purely self-sufficient existence retreats. What if all existence – in which word Heidegger wanted us to hear a standing out or starting forth – were a kind of playful exceeding of the necessary, of what merely had to be?

This idea can begin to erode the confidence that play is the unique and definitional feature of man. We can begin to find this expressed in Nietzsche's notion of nature as unfolding in a sort of free play, and the libidinal energetics that his work has stimulated, from Bataille through to Derrida. It is also to be found in the soberer work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose principal contribution to the theory of play has been to assert what he calls 'the *primacy of play over the consciousness of the player*' (Gadamer 1996, 104)

Play clearly represents an order in which to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal or purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself...

The fact that the mode of being of play is so close to the mobile form of nature permits us to draw an important methodological conclusion. It is obviously not correct to say that animals too play, nor is it correct to say that, metaphorically speaking, water and light play, as well. Rather, on the contrary, we can say that *man* too plays. His playing too is a natural process. (Gadamer 1996, 105)

Gadamer thus can conclude that '[t]he 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' (Gadamer 1996, 103).

I've tried to show that play is constitutive both of modernity and of the idea of man which arises as its correlate. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of a world in which the forces which had originally been marshalled to free man from the exigencies of natural existence had become autonomous of human interests, and were even antagonistic to the human. A leading strand of their argument is that the culture industry has colonised the previously autonomous worlds of art and play, making them no more than a means to guarantee the stability and reproducibility of market relations. 'Laughter', they declare, with monumental grumpiness, 'is the fraud practised on happiness'.

It is possible to give a rather different tilt to this analysis. What if, rather than the realm of play being annexed by the administered world, a certain principle of play had been diffused through the system, such that play constituted the rule rather than exception? In such a set-up we might have to imagine in earnest what the effects would be of a play that played itself out in earnest, without a governing subject. I have said that, for the few hundred years that play has been seriously considered, or been considered to be serious, play has always functioned as excess, exception or anomaly. But

ours is a world built around and governed by the production of play and the consumption of leisure and pleasure. Perhaps in such a world the free play of the faculties has become the fluctuation of desires that nobody can be quite sure any more belong to them, and the interior purposiveness of game has become the immanent dynamic of self-replication of our systematicity as such. Furthermore, ours is a world in which the operations of game have become more and more separated from the conditions of play. Money, science, war, pedagogy, sex, are all being configured as forms of strategy or game-theory, in the sense marked out by Gadamer, governed by the ludic principle, that which gives itself its own rules and purpose.

It is not that the play principle has lost its meaning or effectiveness. But perhaps play is becoming more ambivalent than ever before. And this is for a particular reason, if the function of play has in part been to maintain and multiply ambivalence itself; the condition of play is one in which things both are and are not, both do and do not matter. Bill Shankly, the manager of the Liverpool football team in the 1960s and 1970s once said that football was not a matter of life and death: it was much more important than that. In a condition of *jeux sans frontières*, when the empire of play can no longer be clearly demarcated, play can no longer be reliably or decisively claimed for the principle of free self-unfolding on the one hand, or for the grim clinching of systematicity on the other. When every instance of play deepens the reach of organised complexity, simultaneously loosening and consolidating, when the place of play is no longer self-evident, the effects of play are themselves put into play.

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