



# Questioning Play

What play can tell us about social life

Henning Eichberg

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*With illustrations by Lennart Wulf Eichberg*



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# Questioning Play

What is play? Why do we play? What can play teach us about our life as social beings? In this critical investigation into the significance of play, Henning Eichberg argues that through play we can ask questions about the world, others, and ourselves. Playing a game and asking a question are two forms of human practice that are fundamentally connected. This book presents a practice-based philosophical approach to understanding play that begins with empirical study, drawing on historical, sociological, and anthropological investigations of play in the real world, from contemporary Danish soccer to war games and folk dances. Its ten chapters explore topics such as:

- play as a practice of search
- playing, learning, and progress
- the light and dark sides of play
- playing games, sport, and display
- folk sports, popular games, and social identity
- play under the conditions of alienation.

From these explorations emerges a phenomenological approach to understanding play and its value in interrogating ourselves and our social worlds.

This book offers a challenging contribution to the interdisciplinary field of the philosophy of play. It will be fascinating reading for any student or researcher interested in social and cultural anthropology, phenomenology, and critical sociology as well as the ethics and philosophy of sport, leisure studies, and the sociology of sport.

**Henning Eichberg** is a historian, cultural sociologist, and philosopher. As Professor Emeritus at the University of Southern Denmark, he works in the Centre for Sports, Health and Civil Society at the Department of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics.



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# Introduction

## Play as a practice of quest. Philosophical discoveries through play and game

### Introduction

What do we do when we play a game? What do we do when we ask a question? Maybe these two questions are connected. In this case, play and question may cast light on each other in a way, which deserves deeper study.

We approach this from the side of play. Play is what people do by practice. Do we really need a philosophy of play?

The practice of play is of special importance in the fields of pedagogy, planning, and technology. Three aspects of play have therefore aroused an especially intense interest: learning (play-work), space and place (play-grounds), and technology (play-things). These areas were therefore chosen as objects of critical research at the University of Southern Denmark (Larsen, 2014; Petersen, 2014).

Educators, engineers, architects, and planners who work in these fields often presuppose play as an un-complicated positive activity. One knows what play is. Play is good and should be optimized – play is a plus-word. When looking closer at the practices, it is, however, not all that clear what play is. And play is more ambiguous than often supposed. Different answers to the question of play, different “definitions,” may lead to very different forms of practice. Here we meet the first problem question, which drives the quest of this book.

### Question 1: what is play?

And why do human beings play? Philosophers have raised these questions again and again. The answers have always been diverse: Play is a world for itself, separated from the world of non-play, and this separateness can – and should – be defined. Play is rooted in the world of children as a way of learning. Play is a world of freedom and unproductive fun, opposite to the world of need, work, and production. Play is an as-if activity, which contrasts the real world. By play, human beings (children) are trained to live with and handle rules ...

These imaginations and definitions, contradictory as they may be, seem in one or other way to be derived from the modern myth of industrial life. They

## 2 Introduction

are related to modern production – by seeing play either as training for productive life or as a counter-world to production. On closer observation, play is, however, a plural concept – and much more diverse and anarchic than the definitions suggest. Play is also more contradictory. The studies presented in this book try critically to revise and to deepen this inquiry.

The main agenda of this volume, however, exceeds the traditional question of what play is. The studies turn the quest around and in the inverse direction ...

### **Question 2: what does play tell us about human life?**

If play is a way of curiosity, striving, fumbling, trying, questioning, and searching, what can play then tell us about other phenomena of life, whether these are connected with play or even opposite to it? On a basic level, we learn through play about the ball, the labyrinth, the dance, the mask, the drum, and about sport. Through play, we test our relation to the world, to others, and to ourselves. As a matter of knowledge, and as it is impossible to define play, play tells a critical story about definition. Play enlightens us on phenomenology, on the diversity of language, on normality. In the field of society, play reveals something about productivity, folk, social identity, self-determination, and alienation. And – this is at the core of this book – play as a practice of quest opens our eyes to the human ability to ask: Play enlightens us about the practice of questioning itself.

The study of play, thus, not only benefits philosophical reflection about play as such. Play also offers a practice-based philosophical approach to fields which are much vaster than play. Can play even be – more generally – a springboard for a new materialist and critical theory? Anyway, play leads by concrete bodily movement, by its rhythms of striving and fumbling, into a rich and contradictory world of human life and human knowledge.

### **A bottom-up way of philosophy**

The philosophy of play and games has sometimes been unfolded in the form of abstract classifications, of classes and categories (Suits, 1978, 2014), or as an “integrative concept of play” (Henricks, 2015: 23), which is derived from a historical chain of scholarly ideas about play (Henricks, 2006). This top-down approach is not the way of the following studies. They take their starting point in empirical material from the life world, in the historical and anthropological basis of human doing.

The bottom-up approach gives the narrative an important place. The philosophical procedure which is proposed here begins by narratives of concrete cases. Thus, for a philosophy of play and of identity, we start with Danish football, with the movement in the labyrinth, with a Breton procession riot, or with an Indonesian contest of bow-and-arrow. Philosophy has roots in human doing and can produce understanding by moving bottom-up from bodily material life.

In other words: Life first – and then follow concepts, ideas, abstractions, the movements of thinking.

The basic narratives of these philosophical studies are, thus, not invented *Gedankenexperiment*, which intends to illustrate a given theory. But they speak of experiential phenomena of human practice, whether these are historical, anthropological, psychological, or sociological. From a *historical* perspective, for instance, the transformation of popular games into modern sports leads to philosophical questions of how to analyze the patterns of play. *Anthropologically*, the meeting between Indonesian rainforest Indians and their colonial masters in a bow-and-arrow event leads to the understanding of competitive games, of their cultural relativity and colonial unbalance, and further to the philosophical significance of “the other.” In *psychological* perspective, the movement in the labyrinth leads to the meaning and rhythm of wondering and of playful curiosity, of anxiety and laughter. And *sociologically*, play casts light on folk, social identity, and alienation.

For the practical writing and reading of this book, the empirical-phenomenological approach means that one will find some overlapping in the narratives. For instance, the problem of definition appears in different connections. The anthropology of play informs the cultural relativity of definitions (Chapter 3). The difference between play and game casts light on linguistic problems of definitions, too (Chapter 7). Dark play questions the definition of play as innocent and just good (Chapter 6). And when approaching curiosity as a driving force of play, the tension between question and definition has to be discussed (Chapter 8). From different angles, thus, “definition” reveals itself as a philosophical problem. Therefore, the overlaps of the narratives do not express a disorder, but they are necessary. Phenomenological philosophy proceeds by network thinking, not as streamlined system building. The chapters can be read criss-cross.

### **From cases to critique – to method – and to questions about identity and alienation**

And yet, this volume has a structure as a whole. In the first part, we warm up with some case studies. What is Danish in *Danish football*? Why do people move in the *labyrinth*, and what do they experience there?

The second part raises critical questions towards some commonplaces, which have been established in the philosophy of play. Different attempts have been made to define play. But on the basis of the anthropology of play, we can critically ask whether a *definition* of play really is needed – and whether it is possible. In some definitions, play appears as unproductive – but we have to ask what *productivity* is. Play has been ascribed as the existential function of *learning* and progress for children – but why do elderly people play? And when reflecting play as a harmless “good” – what about dangerous games and *dark play*?

## 4 Introduction

Part III leads into the center of play: its diversity and its kinship with the question. Languages show a diversity of “play” and “game” – and more. And the empirical material as well as some foray into philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Lin Yutang call to our attention that there may be particular connections between play, playful curiousness, the quest, and the *question*. Can we understand play as a way of asking – and is the question a form of play?

In the fourth and last part, the philosophical studies of play open up towards some fundamental patterns of social life. Folk games give hints towards those social identities, which we call *folk* or the *people*. And from the history and experience of the modern *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, the question arises whether play can be seen as an opposite to *alienation*. But we must also ask whether play in itself is subject to alienation. And could it be that the philosophy of play meets the theory of revolution? Are these dangerous questions?

Some of the studies of this volume refer to chapters of my book *Bodily Democracy* (2010), which previously have cast light on:

- traditional games: play, people, and identity (*Bodily Democracy*, ch. 9)
- laughter in sport and popular games (*Bodily Democracy*, ch. 10)
- pull and tug: I, It, and You in play (*Bodily Democracy*, ch. 11)
- interethnic football in the Balkans as play and peace culture (*Bodily Democracy*, ch. 13)
- Danish–Tanzanian exchange of play: recognition and bodily democracy (*Bodily Democracy*, ch. 14).

Further studies have been published about:

- dance as joy and as mania: what is human energy in play? (Eichberg, 2012)
- mass play and the festivity of social movements: how do people play their social identity? (Eichberg, 2013)
- differential phenomenology of play (in: Mindegaard et al., 2014: 147–55)
- configurational analysis of popular games and modern sport: how to study the historical change of play? (in: Mindegaard et al., 2014: 133–46)
- disabled people in play: what is normality? (Eichberg, 2015).

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Special thanks go to Lennart Wulf Eichberg. The Danish artist created some illustrations for this volume and some independently of this book, but all commenting and questioning the written words in an at times surprising and even disturbing way.

All in all, I dedicate this book to my wife. It was not always easy for her to see me “disappear” in the other world of this philosophy.

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