

The

AMBIGUITY OF PLAY



BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH

# *THE AMBIGUITY OF PLAY*

Brian Sutton-Smith



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## *THE AMBIGUITY OF PLAY*

## PREFACE

He cometh unto you with a tale which holdeth children from  
play, and old men from the chimney corner.

*Sir Philip Sidney*

In forty years of pursuing the meaning of play, it has become apparent to me that an understanding of play's ambiguity requires the help of multiple disciplines. But it has also become apparent that it is difficult to approach the subject matter of play directly when there is so much implicit ideological rhetoric that comes with these disciplines. The procedure to be adopted, therefore, is like that of Umberto Eco in his novel *The Name of the Rose* (1983), in which he describes the activity of a group of medieval monks who, having realized that it is impossible to say what God is, have devoted themselves to revealing what God is *not*. And so the margins of their hand-printed Bibles are replete with artistic playfulness exhibiting nonsensical creatures that could not have existed and actions that are impossible. In the present book I attempt to arrive at the meaning of play in a sometimes similarly indirect and nonsensical fashion. I contend that one can conduct a serious examination of the rhetorics that are marginal to play and that this will illuminate our understanding of it. An earlier title of this book was, indeed, "The Rhetorics of Adult and Child Play Theory," which reveals the marginality of the present approach. The chapter epigraphs indicate that it is possible to go even further in pursuing play as marginal. Contrarily, as I have

dealt with my own reflexive involvement elsewhere, I treat it as somewhat marginal here and confine it to a footnote.\*

In general terms, although this work wallows in the mystifications of rhetoric and theory, its intention is to clarify the science of play as well as to celebrate its authenticity.

\*The reflexive issue of how my own scholarship is itself a personal rhetoric of relevance to this volume is too complicated for treatment here. References that are directly relevant are: Chick, 1991; Lee, 1994; Sutton-Smith, 1993a, 1994b, 1994c. The rest of the bibliography under Sutton-Smith and coauthors is at least indirectly relevant.

## *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

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The modern use of a rhetorical approach to matters of scholarship and science probably owes the most, ultimately, to two great scholars of rhetoric, Kenneth Burke, whom I had the good fortune to meet, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom I did not. My more immediate debt is to the three truly great twentieth-century play theorists, J. Huizinga, M. Spariosu, and R. Fagen, who have, wittingly or otherwise, contributed to our playful illusion that the time of the “ludic turn” in Western culture is about to arrive. In addition I must thank the universities that over the years have allowed me, a psychologist, to indulge myself by teaching courses in play, games, toys and sports, the psychology of childlore, and children’s folklore: Bowling Green State University in Ohio (1956–1967), Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City (1967–1977), the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia (1977–1990), and the New College of the University of Southern Florida (1995). Long before that, the University of New Zealand gave me one of its first doctoral fellowships (1949–1950) to pursue my studies of the games of the children in that country. Thanks also to the Fulbright Foundation, which permitted me to continue the same ludic insouciance in the United States (1952–53) and later in Yugoslavia (1984). In addition, thanks to my colleagues for two *Festschriften* about play (Chick, 1991; Pellegrini, 1995a) and two toy research awards (Brio, Sweden, 1994; Halmstad, Sweden, 1996), and to the American Folklore Society for a Life Achievement Award in Children’s folklore, as well as the Opie book award.

Beyond that, I wish to thank all those scholars of play, some ten of whom were my own doctoral students, who have also attempted to discover what it is that we have all been studying (cited in Pellegrini, 1995a). I am indebted as well to those who are cited in the text here and whose works appear in the bibliography. In particular my thanks

go to those who read and reflected on all or part of the present work: Gary Chick, Greta Fein, Felicia McMahon, Tony Pellegrini, and Kevin Sheehan and my sixteen students at New College. I must give special thanks to Peter R. Huttenlocher for providing me with a copy of his "Synaptogenesis in Human Cerebral Cortex" (in Geraldine Dawson and Kurt W. Fischer, eds. 1994. *Human Behavior and the Developing Brain*. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 137–152.) which I draw upon in my Conclusion.

Finally thanks to my father, Ernest James, for confronting our family with a dialectic of order and disorder in his life roles as post office bureaucrat and actor, and to my elder brother, Vaughan, for presenting satirical metadisorders of my father's fabulations, as a result of which most respectable things in my life came to appear as very funny. I thank my mother, Nita Katherine, in turn, for making all of this virtuality appear quite authentic. And I thank my wife, Shirley, and children, Katherine, Mark, Leslie, Mary, and Emily, for being kind and playful about all of this, which is as good as you can get.



My soul, sit thou a patient looker-on;  
Judge not the play before the play is done:  
Her plot hath many changes; every day  
Speaks a new scene; the last act crowns the play.

*Francis Quarles*

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# Play and Ambiguity

A nip is but a nip  
And a boojum  
Is but a buttercup.  
*after Lewis Carroll*

We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity. Some of the most outstanding scholars of children's play have been concerned by this ambiguity. For example, classical scholar Mihail Spariosu (1989) calls play "amphibolous," which means it goes in two directions at once and is not clear. Victor Turner (1969), the anthropologist, calls play "liminal" or "liminoid," meaning that it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality, as if, for example, it were on the beach between the land and the sea. Geoffrey Bateson (1955), biologist, suggests that play is a paradox because it both is and is not what it appears to be. Animals at play bite each other playfully, knowing that the playful nip connotes a bite, but not what a bite connotes. In turn, Richard Schechner (1988), dramaturge, suggests that a playful nip is not only not a bite, it is also *not* not a bite. That is, it is a positive, the sum of two negatives. Which is again to say that the playful nip may not be a bite, but it is indeed what a bite means.

Kenneth Burke's works suggest that play is probably what he terms a "dramatistic negative," which means that for animals who do not have any way of saying "no," it is a way of indicating the negative through an affirmative action that is clearly not the same as that which it represents (thus, again, nipping rather than biting). He says

that prior to the evolutionary emergence of words, the negative could be dramatized only by the presentation of stylized and gestural forms of the positive (Burke, 1966, p. 423). "The most irritating feature of play," says Robert Fagen (1981), leading animal play theorist, "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."

If we seek greater definitional clarity by analyzing the meaning of ambiguity itself, following William Empson's classic *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1955), then we can say that play involves all of his seven types, which are as follows, with the play examples in parentheses:

1. the ambiguity of reference (is that a pretend gun sound, or are you choking?);
2. the ambiguity of the referent (is that an object or a toy?);
3. the ambiguity of intent (do you mean it, or is it pretend?);
4. the ambiguity of sense (is this serious, or is it nonsense?);
5. the ambiguity of transition (you said you were only playing);
6. the ambiguity of contradiction (a man playing at being a woman);
7. the ambiguity of meaning (is it play or playfighting?).

And finally, as if all these paradoxes were not enough, Stephen Jay Gould, evolutionist, says that there are some human traits that are just side effects of more fundamental genetic functions and really deserve no functional explanation themselves. The quotation that heads this chapter, and those in the chapters that follow, would suggest that, if that is the case, there are nevertheless many interesting things about our so-called junk genes. The quotations at the beginning of each chapter also often bring up interesting rhetorics from much earlier times. Many authors use children's play as a metaphor for the ephemerality of life, for what quickly passes, or for what is innocent, infantile, or foolish. Others who are quoted render adult life as a very serious mortal game in which foul play is possible. The diversity of this metaphoric playfulness would seem to suggest that, whether junk or not, play takes on multiple forms in somber discourse.\*

\*Play-related quotations here and throughout the rest of this work are, for the most part, from *Barlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992) Playful quotes, noted as "after" are of fictional status. Dr. Frech is frivolous.

This chapter is a search for some of the more obvious possible reasons for the ambiguity, as well as an introduction to the particular focus of the volume as a whole: the ideological underpinnings of play theories, and what an understanding of them can contribute to clearing up these confusions. The ambiguity is most obvious, however, in the multiple forms of play and the diversity of the kinds of play scholarship they have instigated. Obviously the word *play* stands for a category of very diverse happenings, though the same could be said about most omnibus categories, such as, for example, religion, art, war, politics, and culture.

## The Diversity of Play Forms and Experiences

The diversity of play is well illustrated by the varied kinds of play that are to be found within the larger menagerie of the “play” sphere. Almost anything can allow play to occur within its boundaries, as is illustrated, for example, by works on tourism as play (McCannell, 1976), television as play (Stephenson, 1967), daydreaming as play (Caughey, 1984), sexual intimacy as play (Betcher, 1987), and even gossip as play (Spack, 1986). Travel can be a playful competition to see who can go to the most places or have the most authentic encounters. “Have you done London, the Eiffel Tower, Ayres Rock, Palmer Station, and Easter Island?” Watching television can be watching and identifying with other people at play, whether in fiction or in real life—and, after all, one can turn it off or on, which makes it like play and not like real life. Viewers can control their involvement just as if the “play” belongs to them, as in “playing” with the channels. Even the news, which is “live at five,” is only an account from a studio with theatric backdrops. All of us carry dozens of characters around in our daydreams with whom we carry on imaginary encounters and conversations, none of which are real in the usual sense. Many of the characters in our heads are also people on television or in films, but most are everyday acquaintances. Sexual intimates are said to play with each other in innumerable ways, painting each other’s bodies, eating food off of each other, playing hide the thimble with bodily crevices, communicating in public with their own esoteric vocabulary, and, in general, teasing and testing each other with playful impropriety. Gossip,

by contrast, can be a playfully irreverent game of denigrating those who are not present.

A list of activities that are often said to be play forms or play experiences themselves is presented below. The terms illustrate the great diversity of play phenomena, although they do not indicate the even wider extension of informal play through all other spheres of life. This list itself awaits both adequate description and adequate play theorizing, because the items that it contains are often typically called by other names, such as entertainments, recreations, pastimes, and hobbies, as if it would be an embarrassment to admit that they can also be called play. Each of these states of mind, activities, or events could be described as has I have described with travel and gossip, above. The boundaries between them are never as discrete as listing them here might imply. They are arranged in order from the mostly more private to the mostly more public.

*Mind or subjective play:* dreams, daydreams, fantasy, imagination, ruminations, reveries, Dungeons and Dragons, metaphors of play, and playing with metaphors.

*Solitary play:* hobbies, collections, (model trains, model airplanes, model power boats, stamps), writing to pen pals, building models, listening to records and compact discs, constructions, art projects, gardening, flower arranging, using computers, watching videos, reading and writing, novels, toys, travel, Civil War reenactments, music, pets, reading, woodworking, yoga, antiquing, flying, auto racing, collecting and rebuilding cars, sailing, diving, astrology, bicycling, handicrafts, photography, shopping, backpacking, fishing, needlework, quilting, bird watching, crosswords, and cooking.

*Playful behaviors:* playing tricks, playing around, playing for time, playing up to someone, playing a part, playing down to someone, playing upon words, making a play for someone, playing upon others as in tricking them, playing hob, putting something into play, bringing it into play, holding it in play, playing fair, playing by the rules, being played out, playing both ends against the middle, playing one's cards well, playing second fiddle.

*Informal social play:* joking, parties, cruising, travel, leisure, dancing, roller-skating, losing weight, dinner play, getting laid, potlucks,

malls, hostessing, babysitting, Saturday night fun, rough and tumble, creative anachronism, amusement parks, intimacy, speech play (riddles, stories, gossip, jokes, nonsense), singles clubs, bars and taverns, magic, ham radio, restaurants, and the Internet.

*Vicarious audience play:* television, films, cartoons, concerts, fantasylands, spectator sports, theater, jazz, rock music, parades (Rose Bowl, mummers', Thanksgiving), beauty contests, stock-car racing, Renaissance festivals, national parks, comic books, folk festivals, museums, and virtual reality.

*Performance play:* playing the piano, playing music, being a play actor, playing the game for the game's sake, playing New York, playing the fishes, playing the horses, playing Iago, play voices, play gestures, playbills, playback, play by play, player piano, playgoing, playhouses, playlets.

*Celebrations and festivals:* birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Halloween, gifting, banquets, roasts, weddings, carnivals, initiations, balls, Mardi Gras, Fastnacht, Odunde.

*Contests (games and sports):* athletics, gambling, casinos, horses, lotteries, pool, touch football, kite fighting, golf, parlor games, drinking, the Olympics, bullfights, cockfights, cricket, Buzkashi, poker, gamesmanship, strategy, physical skill, chance, animal contests, archery, arm wrestling, board games, card games, martial arts, gymnastics.

*Risky or deep play:* Caving, hang gliding, kayaking, rafting, snowmobiling, orienteering, snowballing, and extreme games such as bungee jumping, windsurfing, sport climbing, skateboarding, mountain biking, kite skiing, street luge, ultrarunning, and sky jumping.

## The Diversity of Players, Play Agencies, and Play Scenarios

The ambiguity of play, as well as lying in this great diversity of play forms, owes some of its force to the parallel diversity of the players. There are infant, preschool, childhood, adolescent, and adult players, all of whom play somewhat differently. There are male and female players. There are gamblers, gamesters, sports, and sports players, and there are playboys and playgirls, playfellows, playful

people, playgoers, playwrights, playmakers, and playmates. There are performers who play music and act in plays and perhaps play when they paint, sing, or sculpt. There are dilettantes, harlequins, clowns, tricksters, comedians, and jesters who represent a kind of characterological summit of playfulness. There are even playful scholars, such as Paul Feyerabend (1995), Jacques Derrida (1980), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Playful persons in literature and the arts are countless.

Then there is the diversity of multiple kinds of play equipment, such as balls, bats, goals, cards, checkers, roulettes, and toys. Practically anything can become an agency for some kind of play. The scenarios of play vary widely also, from playpens, playrooms, playhouses, and playgrounds to sports fields, circuses, parade grounds, and casinos. Again, while some playfulness is momentary, other kinds, with their attendant preparations, can last throughout a season (as in many festivals and team sports) and, in some cases, over periods of years, as in the World Cup and the Olympics. Play has temporal diversity as well as spatial diversity.

## The Diversity of Play Scholarship

Although most people throughout history have taken for granted their own play, and in some places have not even had a word for it, since about 1800 in Western society, intellectuals of various kinds have talked more or less systematically and more or less scientifically about play, and have discovered that they have immense problems in conceptualizing it. Presumably this is in part because there are multiple kinds of play and multiple kinds of players, as described above. Different academic disciplines also have quite different play interests. Some study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language—and they all use the word *play* for these quite different things. Furthermore their play theories, which are the focus of this present work, rather than play itself, come to reflect these various diversities and make them even more variable.

For example, biologists, psychologists, educators, and sociologists tend to focus on how play is adaptive or contributes to growth, development, and socialization. Communication theorists tell us that



play is a form of metacommunication far preceding language in evolution because it is also found in animals. Sociologists say that play is an imperial social system that is typically manipulated by those with power for their own benefit. Mathematicians focus on war games and games of chance, important in turn because of the data they supply about strategy and probability. Thermonuclear war games, it appears, can be either a hobby or deadly serious. Anthropologists pursue the relationships between ritual and play as these are found in customs and festivals, while folklorists add an interest in play and game traditions. Art and literature, by contrast, have a major focus on play as a spur to creativity. In some mythology scholarship, play is said to be the sphere of the gods, while in the physical sciences it is sometimes another name for the indeterminacy or chaos of basic matter. In psychiatry, play offers a way to diagnose and provide therapy for the inner conflicts of young and old patients alike. And in the leisure sciences, play is about qualities of personal experience, such as intrinsic motivation, fun, relaxation, escape, and so on. No discipline is, however, so homogeneous that all its members are funneled into only one such way of theorizing. Nevertheless the diversity exists, and it makes reconciliation difficult.

Finally there are the ambiguities that seem particularly problematic in Western society, such as why play is seen largely as what children do but not what adults do; why children play but adults only recreate; why play is said to be important for children's growth but is merely a diversion for adults. The most reviled form of play, gambling, is also the largest part of the national play budget. How can it be that such ecstatic adult play experiences, which preoccupy so much emotional time, are only diversions? And why do these adult play preoccupations, which seem like some vast cultural, even quasi-religious subconsciousness, require us to deny that this kind of play may have the same meaning for children?

## The Rhetorical Solution

It is the intent of the present work to bring some coherence to the ambiguous field of play theory by suggesting that some of the chaos to be found there is due to the lack of clarity about the popular cultural rhetorics that underlie the various play theories