

Chapter 2

Play

Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.

Fred Rogers ~ Mister Rogers Neighborhood

The Primacy of Play

Play is ubiquitous in society and dates back to antiquity. From an early age, it engages humans cognitively, physically, affectively, and socially and is now viewed as being central to human development. From birth, infants have an innate interest in exploring what is around them. We rock them, sing to them, and show them pretty objects to engage them. As soon as they are able, we give them toys to cuddle, to touch, and to explore, which they do quite readily on their own. As children grow older and begin to move more capably, they run, jump, and skip in self-directed ways. Children's play is intent and focused and operationalizes learning for them. Children integrate artifacts and events into their lives through their explorations in both individual and social play as they build their perception of the world. In addition to children initiating play, adults take advantage of children's inclination to learn through play, and guide children's play to help their development from infancy to adolescence.

Klein and Winnicott

In the early 1920s, the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein worked with children with affective disorders and began to develop theories about the primacy of play and symbolization in children's cognitive functions.¹ Working with children as young

¹Melanie Klein began her work with children as a psychoanalyst in 1919 in Budapest. She first moved to Berlin and then was invited to work in London (1926) where she became noted for her innovative approach to therapeutic work with young children. <http://www.melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/>.

as two, Klein studied how they interpreted their world and theorized that in playing with toys, and any artifact could be a toy including letters and words, children confer meaning on them. Klein believed that children create a symbolic meaning for the artifact by investing it with their own images and feelings; they do this *only* through what we call play. The meaning of the artifact that is internalized by the child is not what adults consider it to be, but rather what the child has negotiated through their relationship with the artifact within the context of their daily play (Kidd, Young).

While Klein saw play as key to children's symbolization of the world, D.W. Winnicott, the noted child psychoanalyst who had studied with her, saw, in addition, play as fundamental to all human development and as universal. Winnicott believed it was "only in playing [that] the child or adult is free to be creative" and that it is creative living that makes life meaningful (Winnicott 53). Without the creative impulse, meaning can disappear and life can seem worthless. He said the exciting part about play was "the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual artifacts" (47).

Winnicott arrived at an idea of what play is to children by identifying characteristics of the play experience. In play, he theorized, children are preoccupied with an activity; it is difficult for them to leave the activity and it is equally difficult for them to admit an intrusion into the activity. This preoccupation takes place in a personal space that is outside the child, but it is not of the external world, rather it is a construct of the two: the space where an inner reality meets an outer reality. Children bring objects or experiences into this space and impose their own reality on it; they take this personal version of these objects and experiences, what Winnicott called "dream potential," and use it in the external world. In the same vein, children use external events to suit their dream, and they impose their dream feelings and images onto external events. Children's play is exciting because they put themselves in a precarious world of shared realities: theirs, and what is objectively perceived. For a child, play and reality are one-and-the same,² so that adult concepts such as suspension of disbelief are not relevant. Children do not disbelieve.³

In his observations of children Winnicott also noted that while play is pleasurable and satisfying to them, when anxiety becomes too great, play reaches a saturation point and ends in frustration. This important point finds concordance in Vygotsky's stability/crisis theory introduced later in this chapter.

²This is not a complete list of Winnicott's characteristics of play. I have included only those characteristics that are most useful in this particular discussion. For a complete list see D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971). pp. 51–52.

³A presentation that discusses this concept is available at <http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/event/brown-bag-archive/gvu-brown-bag-seminar-krystina-madej> (Madej, Imaginative Understanding and Engagement with Game Narratives).

Defining Play and Games

The characteristics of play defined by Winnicott are similar to those identified by play and game theorists Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. While Klein's and Winnicott's understanding of play resulted from the study of children through psychoanalysis, those of Huizinga and Caillois came from analyzing the constructs of play and games within a social, and in the case of Huizinga, a particularly cultural, context. Both theorists postulated ideas for systematic ways to look at games that today benefit our understanding of how both adults and children engage in play through games.

Huizinga and Man the Player

Huizinga, a Dutch historian and cultural theorist, believed that pure play is a basic human instinct, that it predates and helps form culture, and as such is one of the main bases of civilization. To the appellations *Man the Thinker* and *Man the Maker*, Huizinga added *Man the Player*. Primitive play, what he called the pure playfulness of infants and young animals, was not easy for him to analyse. Easier to analyse were the higher forms of play that could be described because these were more distinct, with features that were articulated and could be defined.

An example of primitive play is seen in the video *Wild Wolves Playing in the Snow* in which young wolves released into the wild from the Chisty Les Biological Station in the Tver Region in Russia can be seen enjoying the “pure playfulness” described by Huizinga (Fig. 2.1).⁴ The wolves display an abandoned delight in their interaction with each other and with the environment. Yet within what appears to be complete lack of restraint, an etiquette (or a set of rules) is followed. These rules

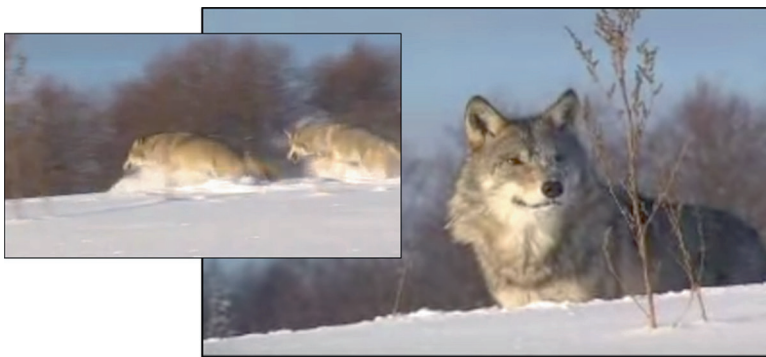



Fig. 2.1 *Wild Wolves Playing in the Snow* displays pure playfulness in the “abandoned” antics


⁴*Wild Wolves Playing in the Snow*, E4C-Channel, You Tube. For further information about this project see www.education4conservation.org.

In the Fun Zone -



I like to call this the "FUN ZONE." The mouth is open and the tongue is flopping around throwing spit everywhere. The ears are straight up and turned in. The tail is waving in the breeze and the wolf is bouncing around. This is play. This is what wolves are best at. They love to play.

Play Stance -



This wolf is showing the classic play stance. There is no secret here as to what the wolf wants. It wants to play with another wolf. If the other wolf takes this wolf up on it, then they either wrestle around in the mud or take off and play a game of tag. Wolves get so involved in playing, that they can forget about what is going on around them. R. D. Lawrence once sat and watched wolves play with each other on a frozen lake for about 20 minutes.

Hare & Hound -

The wolves were playing "hare and the hound." This is a game where one wolf is it and all the others chase after the wolf. The wolves were so involved in playing that they did not notice he was sitting watching. Suddenly, the lead male wolf reached his head up and smelled the wind and then looked over to where Mr. Lawrence was sitting. The wolves quickly left the lake. Mr. Lawrence said it seemed as though they were embarrassed at not knowing he was there.

Fig. 2.2 *In the Fun Zone*: an online discussion of wolf play

include physical attributes of playing the game, such as the *Play Stance* described in the discussion *In the Fun Zone*, an observation of the physical attributes of wolves at play (Fig. 2.2).⁵

Adults today seem to have a fascination with free play and post many videos on *YouTube* that show playful moments between children, between animals, and/or between animals and children. When this play is impromptu and unstructured, it can be defined as pure playfulness.

It is not only today that we attempt to document free play. One delightful *Sesame Street* video from the 1970s, *Kids Playing in the Snow*,⁶ catches the entrancing spirit of young children of four or five making their own fun in the snow, tumbling and falling in delighted playfulness. An earlier Encyclopedia Britannica film documentary on play from 1945, *Play in the Snow*,⁷ shows a scripted version of free play with some activities that demonstrate no rules and others that have rules. In the case of both young animals and children, even the freest play can have rules—as the description of a wolf's *Stance* shows us.

These videos show the focus inherent in play that Michael Csikszentmihaly later identified and named as the experience of flow. Csikszentmihaly noted that this *spirit of play* was not singular to play but was also a function of work, and that the division

⁵ *Wolves of the Beyond*, <http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/2281268-wolf-behavior>.

⁶ *Kids Playing in the Snow*. Sesame Street. c 1970s. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjJn5RUBAOA>.

⁷ *Play in the Snow*. National Geographic. 1945. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96_Iyl3-krs.

society has impressed upon us between play and work is an artificial one. Philosophers and educators since Aristotle's time have suggested children's play activities be channeled towards learning because of this kind of focus and intentness.

Huizinga's study of play identifies seven characteristics that help us define children's (and adult's) play. All can help us come to a better understanding of how the games we create for children provide for a play experience.

Play is a voluntary and free activity: Young children (and animals) seem to need to play, they do so because they enjoy it, this is what makes it free.

Play is not "ordinary" or "real" life, it steps out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity.

Play is disinterested because it stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants, appetites, and material needs. It is a temporary activity that is satisfying in itself.

Play is limited in time and space. It has a beginning, plays itself out within certain limits of time, and ends. Play has a marked space in which it takes place. This is a temporary world within the real world with special rules.

Play has or is order. Deviation from the order, except as planned, takes away its character. This order is reflected as an aesthetic (beauty) that can cast a spell through rhythm, harmony, and tension.

Play has rules. Rules hold the world in place and are absolutely binding. If the rules are transgressed the game ends. This can be done by the *Spoil Sport* who ignores the rules or trespasses on them or the *Cheat* or *False Player* who only pretends to play the game.

Play creates special communities in our society that consist of a circle of players to which it is secret. Inside that circle there is a temporary suspension of real world activities and normal social life, and the laws and customs of the outside world don't count. The player plays [is] another being.

Huizinga theorized that play was a mental process of transformation and had two functions: it was a contest for something and/or it was a representation of something. In that representation, children and adults step out of the common reality into a higher order "making an image" of something different, something more beautiful, more sublime, or more dangerous than the reality (Huizinga 14). This is one of the qualities that attracts players to digital games in which they create a world beyond their common reality.

One of the most influential and enduring of Huizinga's ideas is *The Magic Circle*, mentioned earlier. Although accorded only a short discussion by him in *Homo Ludens*, the idea has been given credence in game studies and adopted by theorists such as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who refer to it in *Rules of Play*, their extensive study of digital games. Huizinga describes the play space as follows:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc. are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (10)

The *Magic Circle* compartmentalizes the play space from the “real world.” It is where only the time, space, and rules of the game apply when we find ourselves “stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 8). Winnicott’s theories about the play space a child inhabits identify an environment similar in nature, one that has a reality imposed by the player.

We saw in the earlier description of wolves playing that until the moment the wolves noticed someone watching they were oblivious to anything outside their play. Their activity created not a physically defined play space, but a mentally defined play space: when jolted out of their focus on playing, their magic circle was broken and their play ended. The *Magic Circle* has been a useful construct in game studies because the intensity of the temporary space created in playing video games creates a very real magic circle for players in which they take on personas and situations that temporarily suspend real life for them.

Caillois and Man as Gamer

French sociologist, philosopher and literary critic, Roger Caillois, noted that Huizinga in his work on play did not study play in relation to games but rather to cultural rituals. With an interest oriented more towards games than towards culture, Caillois included games of chance played for money or gain, such as gambling, casinos, and racetracks, to his study. His ideas about the formal qualities of games follow from Huizinga’s: play is “free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulated, and/or fictive” (Caillois 43). In addition to these qualities of play, Caillois proposed four rubrics for thinking about the psychological attitudes that are inherent in playing games. These were *Agon*, competitions with set rules, *Alea*, games of chance, *Mimicry*, games of make-believe, and *Ilinx*, games of disorientation. Games could display one of these approaches predominantly, or a number of them.

The two principles he identified as governing games provide for a broad spectrum from *Paidia*, the capricious and fantastical, to its opposite, *Ludus*, the disciplined and rule based. Together these qualities, attitudes and principles created a classification system that covered most games. The diagram in Fig. 2.3 shows how these classifications can be grouped, as seldom is only one approach apparent in a game.

Although much of *Man, Play, and Games* discussed adult games, Caillois stated that he did not distinguish between adult and children’s games. To ensure these categories were seen as “essential and irreducible impulses” he looked for behavior in children’s games that corresponded to what he found in adult games (14). While Caillois’s examples for his classifications come to us from the 1950s, a time before digital games, they provide a path that lets us look deeper into what are sometimes considered “simply” children’s games. Figure 2.4 provides his descriptions of children’s actions in relation to adult’s actions.

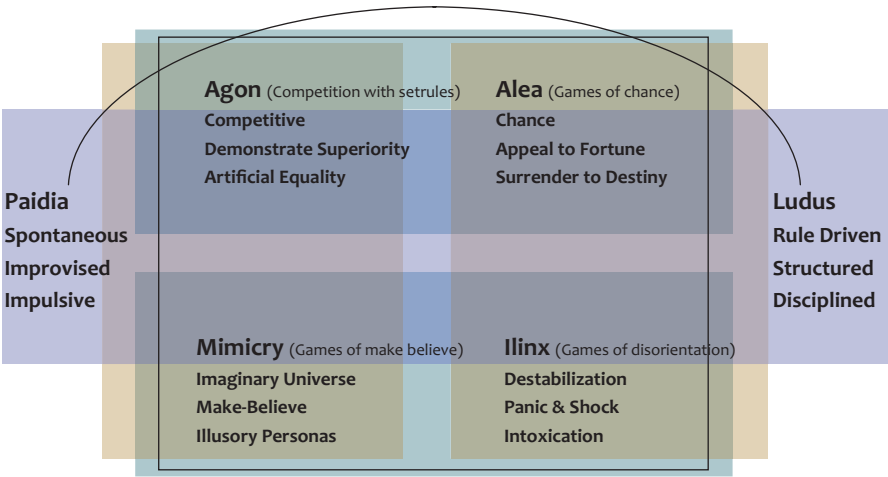


Fig. 2.3 Caillois’s psychological attitudes and principles of games

Agon
... before the emergence of regulated competition, unusual challenges are frequent, in which the adversaries try to prove their greater endurance. They are observed competing to see which can stare at the sun, endure tickling, stop breathing, not wink his eye, etc., the longest (16).

Alea
... games of chance are not as important to children as to adults. For the child, play is active. In addition, the child is immune to the main attraction of games of chance, deprived as he is of economic independence, since he has no money of his own. Games of chance have no power to thrill him (19).

Mimicry
For children, the aim is to imitate adults. This explains the success of the toy weapons and miniatures which copy the tools, engines, arms, and machines used by adults. The little girl plays her mother's role as cook, laundress, and ironer. The boy makes believe he is a soldier, musketeer, policeman, pirate, cowboy, Martian, etc. (21).

Illinx
Every child very well knows that by whirling rapidly he reaches a centrifugal state of flight from which he regains bodily stability and clarity of perception only with difficulty. The child engages in this activity playfully and finds pleasure thereby. An example is the game of teetotum'n in which the player pivots on one foot as quickly as he is able (24).

Fig. 2.4 Children’s testimony to Caillois’s characterization of games

Huizinga's and Caillois's concepts have been adapted for use by ludologists and game developers as theory for video games. Thomas Apperley in his study of ludology and theories of play suggests ludologists adoption of play theories that are applied to cultural practices is an attempt to move video games from a media form to a cultural form. He argues that the ludic position sets the mark of difference between traditional and new media as play and interactivity. Defined as new media, video games became associated with play and interactivity to the exclusion of other media (Apperley). This position takes an unwarranted liberty given the interactivity inherent in other media: substantial historical evidence shows interactive print artifacts date back at least as far as the twelfth century (Madej 2016).

In addition to the play theories of Klein and Winnicott, and of Huizinga and Caillois, the child development theories of key cognitive and behavioral psychologists of the twentieth century can help us understand the place play has in children's development. Jean Piaget in the early-to-mid century, Jerome Bruner in the sixties, and Lev Vygotsky in the seventies and eighties, introduced theories about children's capabilities as they moved from age to age that we are able to refer to when considering the most suitable type of interactions to include in games for a specific age group. Vygotsky, in particular, is associated with ideas about development and play.

Physical Play and Children's Digital Games

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