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(Children's) Play and Organization

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Foreplay

This paper explores play's ambivalent status in the theory and practice of organisation. This ambivalence is evident in microcosm in the previous sentence, which is seemingly about play, but refuses to play (which the dictionary defines as 'having fun' or 'doing something without seriousness'). The dictionary also tells us that play, unlike work, is "an activity engaged in solely for enjoyment and recreation, having no serious or practical purpose". Put another way, if an academic paper purports to represent a phenomenon, is it possible to represent 'play' within the structure, tradition and expectation of academic writing, which is hardly characterised as 'doing something without seriousness'? Can we write academic papers for no serious or practical purpose? Can we play? If it is not possible to analyse a joke without destroying the joke, is it possible to 'study play'?

But we are where we are. And we are what we are.

So instead of studying play, we begin this paper by inquiring into how and why organisation studies excludes play. This turns the question into one about the *identity* of organization studies, and so some preliminary remarks on identity are appropriate. First, we assume that identities – whether we are speaking about the identity of an 'individual' or a 'discourse' — are 'constructed' rather than 'held'. Consequently, we are more interested in the process of *identification* than the notion of identity – which is always multiple and ambiguous – itself.

Second, we accept the post-structuralist position that identification is not so much understood in terms of an interior, thinking being, but rather is de-centred or exteriorised in the interstices of language, within which particular narratives of selfhood or discursive narratives are crafted. Thus, when we speak of identification in organization studies we are concerned with the stratagems of language and action that occur out in the open, rather than anything happening inside people's heads. In the first section of this paper, we will show how Melanie Klein's (1984) insights into the psychological development of children and, in particular, her concepts of splitting, introjection, projection and phantasy are helpful in understanding the development of organization studies' identity.

Getting Serious: A Kleinian Analysis of Organisation Studies.

A starting point for Klein is the notion of *phantasy* (spelled with a 'ph' to distinguish it from the word fantasy), which is the psychological aspect of unconscious instinct. Phantasy activity operates from the earliest moments and is best understood as the mental expression of the life and death instincts, which Klein, following Freud, posits as primordial. According to Klein, the early ego – which Freud saw as the organised part of the self – lacks cohesion, and, while there is a tendency towards integration, this alternates with a tendency towards disintegration. The *death instinct* is manifest as a fear of disintegration and annihilation which creates great anxiety. This fear is realised by the infant as fear of an *object* that is both uncontrollable and overpowering. Klein posits that the destructive impulse of the death instinct is projected or deflected outwards and is attached, through *projection*, onto external objects which must be attacked as they are dangerous and powerful. Specifically, the infant's oral-sadistic impulses towards the mother's breast indicate to Klein that the mother's breast is an early instance of this process of projection. Importantly, this 'bad breast' exists as an external object and – through a process that Klein terms *introjection* – as an *internal* object where it reinforces the fear of the destructive impulse.

But the infant's phantasy also consists of a *life instinct*, which incorporates a preconceptual image of the mother as a caring, loving, nurturing mother. And while the mother is an 'object', Klein focuses on 'part-objects', specifically the mother's breast which she sees as one of the earliest internalised objects in an infant's life. Klein hypothesises that the infant directs his/her feelings of love and gratification towards the 'good' breast and his/her destructive impulses and persecutory feelings towards that which appears to be frustrating – the 'bad' breast. Thus, the part-object is 'split' – a central Kleinian concept – into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast, and through introjection and projection both objects are internalised. The good breast, to

which other features of the mother are soon added, provides a focal point for the emerging ego as it counters the processes of splitting and dispersal, and provides an early and primary part of the semantic scaffolding that the psyche relies on in times of stress. The infant finds security as the good aspects of the breast are exaggerated and idealised (internally) as a corollary to and protection from the persecutory, extremely bad breast. Moreover, the bad breast is not only kept apart from the good one, but its very existence is denied, which is made possible through strong feelings of omnipotence. Thus, two interrelated processes take place: "the omnipotent conjuring up of the ideal object and situation, and the equally omnipotent annihilation of the bad persecutory object and situation" {Klein, 1984 #6157: 7}.

Klein hypothesises that the healthy child moves from this 'paranoid-schizoid position' – characterised by hyper-anxiety, splitting, omnipotence, idealisation, and a hyper-anxious fear of annihilation by part-objects – to a 'depressive position' where the infant becomes able to tolerate some of its own previously projected feelings, especially its feelings of aggression and envy. The infant begins to become self-aware, recognising its own capacity for destruction, its vulnerability and limitations, as it begins to accept rather than deny the complexity of the external world. Crucially, the process of splitting is mitigated, both internally and externally, through recognising that 'mother' is constituted by, *inter alia*, a 'good' and 'bad' breast.

Bion {, 1961/1998 #6279} demonstrated that Klein's theoretical architecture provides a powerful way to understand group behaviour. Following Bion, we posit that the architecture *also applies to discourses*. In the discourse's 'infancy' the same life and death instincts are at play, the same processes of splitting, introjection and projection are at work, the same phenomena of phantasy, idealisation, denial and omnipotence exist, and states broadly equivalent to the paranoid-schizoid, the depressive and manic positions may be identified. For instance, while he didn't use Klein's vocabulary, Strong (1979) was highlighting sociology's death instinct when he observed that

> the ordinary practitioner (of sociology) is grateful for whatever he or she can get, envious of other discipline's success and haunted by the fear that if sociology were shut down tomorrow, very few people would notice any difference (p. 203).

In the case of organization studies, we posit that the splitting between good and bad, and the attachment of good and bad to objects is manifest as the association of 'good' with the working adult and 'bad' with the playing child. The goodness of work draws on a long tradition including Marx's view that human identify is founded on labour and Freud's association of work with the 'reality principle'. In contrast, Freud associated play with wish fulfilment through fantasy, which

was tolerable for children but inappropriate for adults {Riesman, 1950 #6271;Burke, 1971 #6270}. The association of goodness with adulthood is consistent with bourgeois sensibilities prevalent when sociology was being founded, with the (mainly Protestant) ethos of austerity and valorisation of work that characterised earlier stages of capitalism, and with deeper beliefs going back to classical times (in his *Ethics*, Aristotle routinely lumps children with brutes and animals). Through projection, good is attached to the adult at work and bad is attached to the child at play and in turn these are introjected to become a primary lattice in OS's semantic scaffolding. In this way, the study of organizing and organizations has been conducted within business schools wherein the working assumption is that the organization is a business or *work* organization. Within this context, the dominant tradition is that the human agent is idealised as a thinking, rationalising being (*homo sapiens* - from the Latin 'wise man') or, alternatively (and here the Marxist tradition has been influential) the agent is a producer, a labourer (*homo faber*, man the maker). Indeed the traditional distinction between management and labour is one that maps onto these different and partial understandings of the human agent (*homo sapiens* v *homo faber*) around and from which organization emerges.

But, and here we again rely on post-structuralist themes, play — in the Derridian sense — is foundational; there is always difference, supplementarity, ambiguity. So play (as good) may be brought back in as a secondary introjection, which is necessarily mediated through the semantic sedimentation (i.e. meaning is layered down, layer upon layer) that occurs in the primary introjection wherein adult work is seen as good and child's play as bad. Thus, instead of the thinking or making agent, Huzinga's (1938) *homo ludens*, man the player, comes into the frame. Thus, the idea of play and its various modalities — such as children's play, games, sport, dramatic roles and performances, toys and creativity, etc. — are increasingly a part of organizations and understandings of organizational life. This is manifest in the business bookshelves which now house titles like *The Play Zone: Unlock your creative genius and connect with consumers* {Pinault, 2004 #5311}, *Leadership games: Experiential learning for organizational development* {Kaagan, 1999 #6605} *Think, Play, Do: Technology, Innovation, and Organization* {Dodgson, 2005 #5288} and *Serious Play: How the World's Best Companies Simulate to Innovate* {Schrage, 2000 #5310}.

This turn to play in organisation studies is perhaps best understood as an attempt to suture inherent contradictions within purely rationalist representations of organisations which Weber identified when he pointed to the tendency for the rationality of bureaucratic institutions to be predicated on an artificial separation between public and private, between the personal and the

organisational, and implicitly between work and play. Over recent decades, the role of sexuality, emotion, creativity, and other 'non-rational' realms within organisations has been increasingly recognised in both scholarship and in practice. For instance, the shift from hierarchical, rationally organised management structures to more flexibilised styles; from formal meetings organised along the principles of Roberts' Rules, to more informal and experimental meeting styles, both illustrate a shift towards more creative and playful organisational forms. Indeed, ever since management literature took the 'cultural turn' in the 1980s, organizational theorists have identified, represented and promulgated new configurations of work and 'non-work' that point to interesting and creative ways of synthesising the Apollonian (rational) and Dionysian (transgressive) moments in organisational life. For instance, Costea et al {Costea, 2005 #4850} argue that the increase in new mixtures of work/ play interaction is evident of the 'Dionysian Turn' which has occurred since the 1980's in the way work is framed and managed, as demonstrated in new configurations of 'Quality Circles', TQM, team-building events, and other attempts to create a new atmosphere in organisational life. While we don't necessarily agree that management is now 'Dionysian', it is clear that recent literature has attempted to read management and organisational culture through a variety of metaphors, through popular culture, through sexuality, myth, pushing the field beyond the narrow constraints of artificial divisions between work and play, public and private, reason and emotion.

In one, rather obvious and material sense, this secondary introjection we spoke about earlier is manifest in the way the discourse of organization studies feeds on the values and energies of childhood — as the resource of future workers and consumers. For instance, the whole phantasmagoria of mass-mediatized, hyper-real global consumer society depends crucially upon the perpetuation of a collective dreamworld of a youthful, carefree, joyfully innocent childlike bubble, where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness flourish. The harsh reality of modern global capitalism and mass consumer society – the destructive and life-endangering despoiling of nature and the rapacious exploitation of natural resources; a global systematic enslavement of two thirds of the world's population; an utterly ruthless and entirely amoral system that is fuelled by perpetual cycle of violence and warfare and the threat of ever more intense war and violence that threatens the biosphere as a whole – depends very much on the ideological narrative of the fairytale, where good triumphs over evil and we all live happily ever after. But at the level of spirit and idea, the adult world of the organization identifies itself with the world of childhood, and through this identification with the child can conceive of itself as 'childlike', as pure, as naive, as innocent. In the adult world of cutthroat competition in the market, of killer deals and hostile mergers, of vicious backstabbing and nasty politicking in corridors and

photocopy rooms, of power and corruption, of 'conscious and absolute ruthlessness in rational acquisition and profit maximization' (which Weber identifies as the spirit of capitalism) modern organizations need to portray and perceive themselves – as importantly for the key actors as the operatives – as childlike and playful, which is absolutely essential to their legitimating and motivational functioning. Thus bankers and traders 'play the markets'; corporate lobbyists peddle influence, spin doctors and admen play for hearts and minds, entrepreneurs and scientists are animated by the child-like joy of discovery and invention; doctors and nurses, soldiers and policemen play out adult roles endlessly rehearsed in childhood and with the same motivations – curiosity and caring; defending the fort; cops and robbers and so on. And even the most subtlety ambivalent forms of organizational agency, practiced in the shady and liminal interstices of civilization – diplomacy, espionage, and secret service, action that fluidly moves in the amoral zones between and amongst states and corporations, banks and military command bunkers, oligarchs and plutocrats, terror cells, torture chambers and dinner parties – the whole realm of organized intrigue of spooks and spies, deep cover and double agency – is known in the trade as 'the great game.'

One difficulty with this take on play is that it can easily slide into simplistic contrasts between the realm of childhood play — a realm associated with pre-forms of formal organisation that are presumed to be innocent and wholesome — and the realm of adult work which is taken to be corrupted and alienated. In reality, these worlds are not dichotomous but dialectically bound up with one another, not least because the presumed innocence of children is itself a historical and social construction. Childhood is an invented category, as Ariès and others have demonstrated {Ariès, 1962 #5492;Corsaro, 2005 #5487}. It is not a 'natural' state but an historically and anthropologically varied social construct, with any meaningful substantial difference between a person of six or eight years old and a little 'adult' being a relatively modern distinction. But what of babyhood and infancy, surely there we are on more anthropologically generalizable grounds? Yes, but even there the distinction of innocence is unsustainable. Psychoanalysis shows how, far from being innocent, the world of babyhood and infancy is a dark, chaotic world of Titanic and epic power plays: the coprophagic baby-monster would devour the mother; the polymorphously perverse infant is a seething mass of raging, insatiable desires and furious terrors; 'His Majesty the baby' tyrannically rules the nursery and as soon as he is able he would kill the father to have the mother. The kindergarten and playground are battlefields of barbarian warfare, and young children will bully, blind, burn and bite one another, cruelly ridicule, ostracize, scapegoat and even torture one another without the restraining and punitive super-egoic power of parents, teachers and other adult interventions to limit and govern their 'play'. In

all of these ways, again, we see played out in the adult world of work and organization not something substantially different and separate from childhood, but rather its continuity in higher and more sublimated forms, with organized, technicized and rationalized collectivized violence, and professionally channelled, egotistically calculated predation and gratuitous cruelty. The unregulated market, like the unsupervised playground, is potentially a cauldron of violence and a theatre of cruelty that tends towards catastrophe and its perpetual recurrence.

But now we seem to have done violence to the idea of childhood, and to the phenomenon of play in particular. While childhood conflicts may still be playing out in the adult world, the lifeworld of the child is much more vulnerable to the immense violence visited upon it from the adult world – individually in the form of neglect, economic exploitation, physical and sexual abuse, and collectively even more so by the violence of structural inequality, poverty, warfare and disease perpetuated at the level of geo-political economy by the institutions and organizations of the military-industrial-entertainment complexes. From this hell that has been (and still is) the lot of the majority of the worlds' children, a catastrophe visited on children by the playing out of organized world adult powers, we would want to salvage the idea of (children's) play as a utopian moment wherein we might locate the possibility of redemption.

Celebrating Play

One problem with the concept of play is that it encompasses such a broad sweep of different phenomena. The value and the limits of the term come from its multiple meanings, which we can glean from the dictionary.

First, play is about free movement in time and space: "the ball was put in play", "to bring into play, to put into motion", "to move freely within a space, as a part of a mechanism", "to move about lightly or quickly: The water of the fountain played in the air", "the umpire says that ball was not in play". Play is 'played out' within certain limits of time and place. Play has a beginning, an ending, and its own rhythm, grace and aesthetic. One of Caillois' {, 1961 #5277} four forms of play is *ilinx*, or vertigo: forms of play that "consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" p. 23. And while movement is a necessary part of play, there is also a curious order within play: indeed one can say that play creates a (temporary) order. From this perspective, organization in play means that our understanding of organization is continually moving and changing - it is 'in play'. Here, we are reminded of Derrida's concept of 'différance', of the continual play of meaning that the postmoderns have brought to the fore, with their stress of

language *games* in place of grand narratives (read serious stories). Play as an organising metaphor captures the play of language within social interaction and within organisations, and the endless play of meaning within organisational cultures.

Second, play is "to do something without seriousness: He is merely playing at being a student". Play, unlike work, is "an activity engaged in solely for enjoyment and recreation, having no serious or practical purpose" (although play can absorb the player intensely and totally). This definition most probably has marginalised play within organization studies. Work (the realm of organization) is serious and practical, while play is not. The dictionary also makes it clear that play is associated with if not the preserve of childhood: play is an "activity engaged in for enjoyment and recreation, *esp. by children*" (emphasis added). The play perspective brings to the fore the rather startling fact that while organization studies has an extremely catholic understanding of what is properly within its compass, it has been virtually silent on the topic of childhood, even though children are very much the subject of and subject to organization.

Third, play is a theatrical performance or dramatic composition; it is "a dramatic work for the stage or to be broadcast". In this definition we understand play through the concepts of representation, imitation, and dissimulation that are 'at play' in theatrical performances — as in "she played Ophelia" — and also in informal play — as in "she played nurse", "the boys played cowboys and Indians". Play is extra-ordinary, taking the players out of the ordinary world, but through play crucial aspects of the 'ordinary' world are re-created, re-played as it were, as we see in the gender stereotyping that occurs through and in play.

Fourth, play is a synonym for gaming. In the dictionary, play is defined as "to bet or gamble at or on", "to take part in a game for stakes", "to exploit or trade in (an investment, business opportunity, stock, etc.". Carr {, 1968 #5141} wrote an influential *Harvard Business Review* article in which he argued that business was just a game, akin to a game of poker. Just as poker fosters and celebrates behaviour (such as bluffing), which might be unacceptable in the ordinary world, so it is with business. Business is but a game, with its own rules of behaviour, its own distinct ethic as it were, separate from the world ordinaire.

Fifth, play is connected to the related concepts of jesting, the comic and foolishness: "I said it merely in play", play is "fooling around". Yet, the paradox of play is that while laughing and playing seem to fit together naturally, some play can be very serious indeed. And while play is semantically linked to foolishness, and the practice of playing the fool, it still stands separate from foolishness.

Sixth, play is also semantically connected to sex, erotic play and flirtation: "to try to attract, esp.

sexually: He made a play for his friend's girlfriend." To masturbate is "to play with oneself"; to be sexually promiscuous is "to play around"; the activity preceding sexual intercourse is "foreplay". In the animal world, play is routinely understood as sexual display because it is predominant at the mating season.

Seventh, the concept of play is linked to sound and music in particular: "to perform on (a musical instrument)", "to produce sounds: The strings are playing well this evening. The radio played all night". The playing of music is an enduring feature of human rituals, which, as Huizinga has argued, retain "the formal characteristics of play in every respect" {Huizinga, 1955 #2147: 14}.

Thus, our understanding of play is played out within a wider network of related concepts that include childhood, jesting, foolishness, laughter, sex, music, movement, enjoyment, recreation, non-seriousness, theatre, drama, representation, imitation, dissimulation, extra-ordinariness, ritual, rules, gaming, betting, rhythm, rapture, grace, order and aesthetic. Play is that form of activity engaged in for its own sake. Play has no end other than itself. Play has no meaning exterior to itself. The child plays while playing. 'Why does the child play?' Heraclitus asks. 'He plays because he plays'. What Heraclitus means here is not that play is meaningless activity — for it is highly meaningful and meaning-making — but simply that play has no ulterior motive outside of its own terms of reference {Huizinga, 1955 #2147;Burke, 1971 #6270;Caillois, 1961 #5277}. Play, like all forms of human action in Weber's typology, may be 'traditional' (i.e. habitual) 'substantive' (motivated by values, e.g. making friends and getting along with them) or 'instrumental' (conducted on a means/ends rational calculation, e.g. winning, beating a rival, cheating). And play may be analyzed in terms of Habermas's crucial addition to Weber's action typology – play may be 'communicative', i.e. oriented towards reaching understanding. Play may be, and usually is, all of these things rolled into one, and analysis of play that seeks to take the phenomenon apart in terms of these action types may well do damage to the integrity of play, or miss something crucial and essential to the phenomenon, as we see in clumsy managerial attempts to make work more playful {Fleming, 2005 #6272}. We find that the best writers on childhood play — Erik Erikson, for example, who uses a child's expressive play in holistic psychoanalytic diagnosis and therapy, and Walter Benjamin's attention to children's stories, play, imagination and improvisation — have this holistic understanding of the phenomenon and thereby preserve play's utopian moment.

Let us take first Erik Erikson's {, 1963 #6130} classic formulation of the importance of play. Erikson introduces his discussion through Mark Twain's depiction of Tom Sawyer's friend Ben as he sails down the street playing at being a steamboat on the Missouri, as well as him being

engine and controls, the captain and crew all at once, and manoeuvres in to 'dock' alongside Tom, who is painting a fence. This vignette is structured around the usual opposition between 'work' and 'play' – Tom is working, painting the fence, Ben is playing, mimicking a steamboat. In the *denouement* of the scene, of course, the opposition turns out to be a false one, as Tom inveigles Ben into painting and the boys' 'work' becomes, in the course of their companionship, conversation and fantasy, reciprocally infused with the ethos of 'play', and their ensuing adventure folds work and play seamlessly together. Play, Erikson concludes, is the ego's attempt to synchronize bodily and social processes within the self. For him, play is the synthetic principle whereby id and superego are reconciled with ego as the child learns to negotiate and gain mastery over the autocosmic (the child's own body), microcosmic (objects as projections) and macrocosmic (social) realms.

In the scenario above Ben appears to be 'idle' whereas Tom is 'working', but Erikson (and Mark Twain) shows that play is that seemingly idle activity whereby the child synthesizes, orders and organizes reality. What Erikson does here is the equivalent in psychoanalysis and developmental psychology of Simmel's fundamental sociological insight into the primary process of society, namely 'sociability.' Sociability, Simmel says, is the "play-form of association" {Simmel, 1949 #6143: 255}. Like play, "sociability in its pure form has no ulterior end, no content, no result outside itself" (ibid). Sociability, the seemingly 'idle', 'pointless' interaction for its own sake, is really society 'idling' in the very important sense of 'ticking over': it is society's ground tone; its basic, normal running order. Far from being a trivial or superfluous phenomenon, sociability turns out to be the very essence, the irreducible principle of society as such. To be strictly analytic about it, if one were to take any social institution, any practice or social process (i.e. family, kinship, work or organization) and strip it down, taking away that which makes it other than itself, what will remain as an irreducible, essential core, common to all social phenomena, is *sociability*. Through this we begin to perceive that play is ordinarily excluded from the discourse of organization, and perceived as its dialectical antithesis, but is paradoxically essential to the nature and functioning of formal organization and is its interiorized synthetic organizing principle. Play is the 'not work' interactions and practices within work and organizations – the coffee and cigarette breaks; the gossip, the grapevine and the rumour mill; flirtations and office romances; the manoeuvrings, inter-personal rivalries, petty intrigues, jockeying and backstabbing; internal complaints, exhaustive procedures and interminable meetings that appear to be a tremendous waste of time and energy. These aspects of play are the bane of HR, and are usually taken to be symptoms of dysfunction and the 'sick organization'; however, this 'play' is paradoxically the 'lifeblood' that makes 'work' possible and productive,

giving it positive ontological form.

The proof of this becomes apparent when forms of organization are stripped or emptied of their play forms, and become pathological, malignant, sterile or unsustainable, and are inevitably overthrown and discarded: “If sociability entirely cuts its ties with the reality of life out of which it makes its own fabric.., it ceases to be a play and becomes a desultory playing-around with empty forms, a lifeless schematism...proud of its lifelessness” (Simmel and Wolff, 1950: 55-6). Organizations and working relations from which play has been expunged become alienated drudgery, tyranny and slavery, and are no longer animated/synthesized by an integrating *esprit des corps.* Forms of organization wherein play is prohibited or systematically expunged become ‘total institutions’ – prisons, asylums, monasteries, sterile, static non-creative and inflexible organizations that, however long they may stand, function primarily as exceptions that prove the rule that normal, healthy forms of organizational life are, by complete contrast, founded and function on the principle of ‘free play’.

Another perspective on the role that play plays in constituting organization can be found in the central thesis of Goffman’s classic study of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* {Goffman, 1956 #1731}. In Goffman’s dramaturgical paradigm, organizations are the institutionalized performances of actors engaged in dramatic roles. The individual person learns to assume a mask, or masks, that correspond to various social and organizational parts that they play. A carpenter – who is also a soccer coach, a father of five, the chairman of a tenants’ association, a Samaritan’s volunteer and a weekend homosexual – wears these different masks, and many others besides. The anthropological universality of this is evidenced even etymologically, in that the word ‘person’ is derived from the Latin word *persona,* meaning ‘mask’. The organization and its numerous roles – managerial, professional, service and functionary – is already prescribed for the performance, in terms of its settings, expressive apparatus, scripted roles, and the organizationally competent member is the person who, once appropriately socialized and rehearsed, enacts the performance by playing his or her part.

From this point of view (although this was not Goffman’s point), children’s play can be seen as anticipatory socialization, as purely a dress rehearsal for the more important business of participation in ‘adult’ forms of sociation, such as mere practice for formal organizational life. A contrasting understanding of play is captured by the Derridian concepts of *différance* and supplementarity, which emphasise that meaning is always deferred and in play, seems more attractive. Derrida’s point – though it is always obfuscated – is that originary truth is a conceit and that at the core there is no more than ‘*freeplay’* that itself undermines the very idea of a core

(since it rests on and creates a semiotic system where meaning is always moving) {Derrida, 1972 #1131}. Play, then, is foundational (and the foundations are in play, meaning there are no foundations). Through a close and playful analysis of 'foundational' texts, Derrida showed that what appeared to be originary is unstable, ambivalent or untenable. All apparent organization is both founded on play and can be subverted by play.

As well as reminding us about the inherently sociable dimension of play, children's play is important because children have the capacity for forms of play which involve the creation of something new; for 'free' rather than the rigidly pre-scripted, 'directed' play that often defines the cross-marketed, Hollywood-influenced 'commoditoys' of the contemporary toy industry {Langer, 1989 #6410}. In contrast, children from birth have the "gift of mimesis" according to Benjamin, which "is the natural heritage of mankind in its early stages and which continues to function nowadays only in children" (Benjamin, 1933/1999: 691). Mimesis encourages children to imagine themselves not simply as other people, but also as objects, and through play they are capable of transcending the often narrow, prescriptive roles imposed by the culture industry's tendency to produce toys for sale that are tie-ins with other objects. Free play has the potential to disrupt the narrow circle of desire for accumulation's sake that is inherent in commodity fetishism, since children have the potential through free play to invest toys with new meanings, often unintended by the creator {Benjamin, 1928/1999 #6412: 690}. To Benjamin, the cognitive potential of mimetic play is potentially liberating because it can resist the capitalist commodification of culture and raise us above the dreamscape of consumer fetishism. Through mimesis, fantasy and reality converge, and out of that meeting, something new emerges {Benjamin, 1928/1999 #6412: 115}. Play is always liberating to Benjamin, and as adults, we are still drawn to old toys, play and fantasy, despite or precisely because of a 'desire to make light of an unbearable life' (ibid).

Endgame

For us, play is an ontological primitive, a fundamental concept that transcends context, which means that we are unconcerned about issues of who can play, who cannot play, and who regulates the play. As Roy {, 1958 #3689} demonstrated in his classic ethnography, Banana Time, play and play-acting are available at all times to everyone, including not only humans but all advanced mammals {Sutton-Smith, 1997 #5290}. At the same time, the word floats within an archipelago of meanings in the English language, while in some other languages (such as Irish) a single word is not used to cover a wide range of phenomena, from a child playing make-believe to a professional golfer playing golf. While play underpins competitive activity —

including sports, gaming and business — it can also be marginalised and confused by other logics. To ease the confusion, we find it useful to look at play in terms of the centrality of winning (and losing), the public/private nature of the calculation, and the degree to which harm is intrinsic to the play. While Caillois {, 1961 #5277} sees competitive play (*agôn*) as one mode of play, we prefer to not call this play, not least because it creates an unhelpful confusion of categories, when, for instance, we think of business as a game (see Carr {, 1968 #5141} for development) or when we try to distinguish between professional players of games (pay-for-play) and recreational players of the same sport. While play may underpin competition, *contra* Caillois we do not see competition as a distinct *form* of play. Rather, we find it more useful to think in terms of how important winning (and losing) is in a particular play context. Determining when and where winning is important is partly an issue of context and interpretation, but one useful metric is to focus on *harm*, and the degree to which harming others, either players or non-players, is intrinsic to the play. This allows us to distinguish, for instance, between war and sport, both of which are founded on the logic of play and which are similar except in the crucial aspect of how harm is considered. On another dimension, we find it useful to distinguish the degree to which play is a public or a private performance (recognising that a 'public' performance may be made less so by, for instance, constituting the 'public' as a communitas). Putting these two dimensions (Figure 1) provides a useful frame for thinking through play.

Winning Vital	1. Sado-masochism Bullying	2. War	*Harm intrinsic to play*
Winning important	3. Parlour games Internal goods in practices (MacIntyre)	4. Competitive sports Business	
No competition	5. Fantasy games	6. Carnivalesque	*Harm extrinsic to play*
	PRIVATE	PUBLIC	

Figure 1: Play Zones

While one might see play and harm as antithetical, this is precluded once we play is understood as foundational. The issue, as the continuum on the right sets out, is the degree to which harm

is intrinsic to the play. In the case of Cells 1 and 2, harm is intrinsic to the play, and these are distinguished solely by the degree to which the play and the harm it causes is public or private. The difference between Cell 2 and Cell 4 is neatly captured in George Orwell's quip that "serious sport is war minus the shooting". Winning is important and winning is public, but harm is neither intrinsic or extrinsic to the play. This is the domain of business (as a game), competitive sport and most especially professional sport, where potential harm caused to losers and non-palyers is mitigated through regulation and enforcement. In contrast, the concept of winning is anathema to cells 5 and 6 which are distinguished by whether the play is private, as in fantasy games (either played individually or in private groups such as in the family) or in public, as one finds in the carnivalesque and public spectacles. A parlour game (e.g. family card games) is a good example of private play where winning is important (Cell 3), but harm is not intrinsic to the play (which is not to say that the losing is without some discomfort). MacIntyre's idea of 'goods internal to practice' - in contrast to 'external goods' which are necessarily public – provides another example of a form of play that fits into Cell 3 In simple terms, a carpenter gets reward from hammering nails, cutting timber, making a staircase, etc. This is the winning that is 'internal' to the practice of carpentry, not the money, or any other 'external' good such as an award conferred by others for, say, winning a furniture-making competition.

Finally, let us end where we began. Frames such as figure 1 are problematic because as play is foundational it is axiomatically beyond representation, it being the part of life (and death) that cannot be symbolically appropriated or expressed. As such, it is the ever-present needle bursting our balloons of theoretical conceits. And as they burst, we must laugh, and start blowing again.

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