
Theme and Variation

Arranging Play's Forms, Functions, and "Colors"



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The author counters the common descriptions of play as endlessly diverse, ambiguous, and even paradoxical by describing it as a fundamental experience comparable to three others—ritual, work, and *communitas*. Play, he argues, entails a distinctive strategy of self-realization and a strategy for living. He first examines four basic types of play—exploration, construction, interpretation, and dialogue—and links them respectively to four patterns of self-location: marginality, privilege, subordination, and engagement. He then discusses the character and implications of the four kinds of play and evaluates a profoundly important variation in all play—that between its orderly, cooperative expression and its disorderly, oppositional articulation. Calling the first “green play” and the second “red play,” the author asserts that both are pertinent to all four kinds of play and that both have important implications for self-realization. **Key words:** *communitas*; green play; patterns of self-location; red play; ritual; self-realization; types of play; work and play

MANY SCHOLARS OF PLAY focus on one expression of the activity. Some concentrate on rough-and-tumble play; others, on role play and story making. They write about constructive play with blocks and materials of every other description, imaginative play that sometimes leads to literary or artistic creation, and video gaming that involves players in complicated cultural scenes and offers them opportunities to influence the character of these scenes. Scholars analyze sports and games in seemingly endless variety. They study play with dolls and other toys. They examine play as bantering, insult, and other forms of human exchange. Indeed, they typically choose the kind of play that matters most to them. This approach—selecting particular versions of play, exploring the range of their meanings, and declaring the results of these inquiries to reveal general themes of play—has served the interdiscipline of play studies well in some

regards. It has ensured that many forms of play receive in-depth study. It has prevented any one theoretical viewpoint about what play is or what it means from dominating others. It has kept the field open—that is, wide ranging in its interests, receptive to new developments, and flexible in its interpretations.

Still, some play scholars also attempt to understand what common themes unite these different versions of play and, more precisely, how these different versions relate to one another. Here I plan to participate in this ongoing debate about the nature of play and present a theory of play's basic themes that I can use to situate various play types in meaningful relationship to each other.

To start, I consider briefly some of the issues that make it difficult to present a general theory of play. Then, I present my view that play offers a distinctive pathway of experience with characteristics shared by its many versions. A pathway of experience, I should note, constitutes a behavioral trajectory that coherently organizes the actions of persons, supports their attainment of the goals they envision, and facilitates their emotional responses to these actions (see Henricks 2012, 2015). Play, or so I argue, can be compared productively to three other fundamental pathways of experience: ritual, work, and *communitas*. This comparison leads to a list of play's chief characteristics and general implications. In this sense, play expresses a general theme.

In the second and major part of this article, I present a strategy for thinking about play's variation. I identify and discuss four types of play: exploration, construction, dialogue, and interpretation. I analyze how each modifies play's fundamental function, which means I investigate strategies for living. I then consider an issue that transcends all versions of play and affects the way in which different play behaviors develop. This issue concerns whether play manifests itself primarily as order-seeking creativity or, instead, as commitment to disruption, disorder, and deconstruction. I discuss these two, seemingly opposed aspects of play as "green play" and "red play." I conclude by addressing the relationship of these two expressive styles of play and consider their respective roles in playful self-realization.

Difficulties in Conceptualizing Play

There is a proud tradition in play studies that asserts play to be endlessly diverse, ambiguous, and even paradoxical (Sutton-Smith 1997). Play is filled with meanings—social, cultural, psychological, and biological—that defy easy descrip-

tion. According to this view, other kinds of behavior may develop in steady or regimented ways, ways that can be explained well enough, but play is fanciful, irregular, and evanescent. Not confining itself to any one setting or object of interest, play may erupt at any moment, sometimes taking over these more regimented behaviors. Just as suddenly, the play spirit vanishes; seriousness and normality reclaim the day.

For some, play defies simple description also because of its largely hidden subjective component. Two individuals standing side-by-side observing one another or interacting more directly may participate in the same line of activity, and to one of them but not to the other, the behavior may seem like play. And the commitments to one sense of things or the other may themselves be unstable. Enthusiasms dive and resurface, curiosity shifts (Eberle 2014). All at once, the serious or fretful participant becomes the one having fun, while the other drifts away. Play has a marvelous ability to enter almost any situation and to develop it in ways those involved had not intended. Indeed, we play not only to control situations but also to be unsettled or even confounded by them.

Still another source of difficulty for some play scholars lies in the fact that such behaviors are exceedingly varied and culturally mutable. Different societies emphasize different kinds of play and conduct these activities in their own ways (Schwartzman 1978; Roopnarine, Johnson, and Hooper 1994). Men and women, boys and girls adopt patterns that speak to the circumstances of their particular lives. Rich people favor activities—and styles of activity—that differ from those of poorer people. Play varies by age, ethnicity, region, and the other divisions societies hold important. Schools sponsor play events that respond to their distinctive concerns; so do communities. Thus, scholars should not imagine they can put play into a one-size-fits-all framework.

Consider yet another issue. Many play scholars find it difficult to specify just what object or element constitutes the focus of play or, indeed, becomes “in play.” Is only the ball in play in a game of table tennis, or should we say that the more important contest concerns the player on each side of the net and, perhaps, involves the bragging rights that follow? Others again maybe see the game differently as an exercise in physical self-control (perhaps a chance to master one’s backhand) or psychological control (managing nerves in a tense situation). Can we also think of the game itself—a cultural form that many people are familiar with—as something that is being played well or poorly? To state all this more formally, players participate in different “fields of relationships”—psychological, social, cultural, bodily, and environmental (Henricks 2012). In each of these

settings, we accept some elements as guidelines or frameworks for behavior; other elements we select as points of contention. We play in, with, and against such elements.

Clearly, there are many ways of thinking about what makes for playful behaviors, and indeed, scholars disagree about the ontological reality that is play. Let us consider six different ways of examining play's character (see Henricks 2015). In the first instance, we can see play as *action*, that is, as a pattern of individual expression that involves some level of conscious conception and behavioral control. To play is to move oneself about in particular ways. Secondly, we can view play as *interaction*, not what an individual does alone but instead some pattern of give-and-take between an individual and the object he or she plays with, against, or at. This more impersonal viewpoint leads to a third, even broader one: we can see play as *activity*, that is, we can understand it as a series of interrelated behaviors occurring across a broader stretch of space and time. For example, most games feature a wide range of behaviors: choosing sides, finding positions, taking turns, enforcing rules, keeping score, chatting, teasing, and so forth. Are all these behaviors parts of the play?

If we understood play only as observable behavior, we would not find the problem of characterizing it unduly difficult. But play, as we have seen, has an important subjective component. So, fourth, we can think of play as *disposition*, that is, as some psychobiological appetite to do something interesting and invigorating with almost any object or situation. A fifth way we can think of play is as something that individuals *experience* while they are involved in the actual performing of an event. To pose this as a question: Is the sense of involvement players feel different from what individuals feel during other activities? Does play feature a distinctive emotional pattern or sequence?

Sixth and finally, one can think of play as a special relationship to the *context* that supports and guides the activity. As noted above, players rely profoundly on the contexts of their own bodies, the physical environment, social relationships, culture, and their own psyches. But they also play against or with selected elements of these contexts. So understood, play is a way in which participants comprehend their (often precarious) standing amidst the contexts that form the conditions of their lives. Said differently again, players *make meaning*—by adjudging both what is going on inside the event (as they comprehend the emerging character and implications of the activity) and outside the event (as they assess the relationship of the event to its environmental surround). The challenge for scholars—and it is a very substantial one—is to determine if players

make meaning differently in play than they make meaning in other endeavors.

The issues involved in these six ways of considering play have led some scholars to declare play a paradox because it seems to display certain qualities and the opposite of those qualities at the same time (Loy 1982; Handelman 1992). For Joseph Levy (1978, 1), “To play means to accept the paradox of what is at once essential and inconsequential.” Johan Huizinga (1955) famously depicted play as both rule bound and free spirited, serious and nonserious. Brian Sutton-Smith and Diana Kelly-Byrne (1984, 30) stressed that play is both “equilibrating” and “dis-equilibrating.” According to such accounts, it is the essence of play—and of players—to rebel against the restrictions of the world; but these very forms and forces are also the groundwork of play. Players require guiding—and opposing—frameworks to focus their creative spirit, to feel themselves moving into, through, and against the world.

Play’s Guiding Theme

I deeply respect the tradition I have been describing. Play is impressive in its variety. Typically, it is guided by the subjective inspirations of its participants and because of that assumes shapes that are quite transient and fragile. It can present meanings that operate at different levels and in different ways. But I maintain also that play displays particular overriding qualities that make it different from other behaviors. To some extent, play expresses a general pattern of human relating. In what follows, I seek to identify this general pattern by comparing play’s traits to those of work, ritual, and *communitas*. I suggest that play is a distinctive strategy for self-realization, one that centers on processes of goal attainment.

Elsewhere, I have argued that play scholars tend to think about their subject—and to define its general qualities—in the wrong way (Henricks 2015). The common approach emphasizes how play differs from everything else humans do. These scholars think play is special, exotic, or exceptional. Occasionally, they compare play to work or to other, more routine or utilitarian pursuits. Usually they do not fully flesh out these comparisons but simply stress how play differs entirely from other activities. All the more reason, or so the thinking goes, to cherish, preserve, and study it.

Once again, I have no quarrel with those who stress play’s specialness. But I emphasize how important I believe it to be to compare play much more systematically to other, equally fundamental behaviors and, in the process, to

consider what qualities these other behaviors possess. Such a comparison, I contend, suggests that play shares some characteristics with these other behaviors. Play's uniqueness—and the uniqueness of the other behaviors—centers on the way in which this variety of traits combine.

My own attempts at this comparison have focused on four fundamental human activities: play, work, ritual, and the acts of immersion and bonding I call "communitas." Johan Huizinga (1955) in *Homo Ludens* anticipates my last distinction. He stresses the importance in traditional societies of what he calls the "play-festival-rite" (31) complex when people immerse themselves in symbolically charged public gatherings, embrace shared rules, and explore their own possibilities within these frameworks. As Huizinga's term denotes, such events are combinations of fundamental matters. However, his construction also makes clear that play, ritual, and festival (in my language, communitas, in its more effervescent version) are different ways of organizing behavior. As Huizinga sees it, play in its "higher forms ... always belongs to the sphere of festival and ritual"; but play stripped of this elaboration is different from either form. And play is conspicuously different from the activities we think of as work, which are typically ordinary, routinized, utilitarian, and focused on material gain. In this light, play is distinguished by its "disinterestedness" (9).

In a recent book, *Play and the Human Condition* (Henricks 2015), I compare the four behaviors systematically (see figure 1). I claim play to have some traits that, taken together, make it a distinctive way of operating in the world. However, play does not differ entirely from the other three behaviors; some traits are shared with them. In the book, I offer a full review of play definitions and a justification for the traits listed, which I will not repeat here, but as figure 1 reveals, playful action is distinguished from other kinds of action by the extent to which play is both transformative and consummatory. In the first instance, that means that play takes an assertive stance toward the environment, one by which individuals try to make changes to existing conditions. The second term refers to the way players seek intentionally restricted settings and focus their action strategies within those settings. To play is to commit oneself to bounded moments.

As interaction, play is unpredictable and contestive. The first adjective connotes the degree to which the object world contains elements that confound the player's anticipations and make orderly behavior difficult. The second refers to the ways in which the object world stands apart from and resists the player's advances so that adjustments on the part of the player are required. So understood, play has a call-and-response or give-and-take quality.

	PLAY	WORK	COMMUNITAS	RITUAL
As Action				
Stance toward Object-world	Transformative	Transformative	Conformitive	Conformitive
Rationale for Behavior	Consummatory	Instrumental	Consummatory	Instrumental
As Interaction				
Directionality Of Engagement	Unpredictable	Predictable	Unpredictable	Predictable
Pattern of Engagement	Contestive	Contestive	Integrative	Integrative
As Activity				
Source of Event Governance	Self-Regulated	Self-Regulated	Other-Regulated	Other-Regulated
Organization of Action Sequences	Episodic	Interdependent	Episodic	Interdependent
As Disposition				
Readiness for Action	Curiosity	Self-Confidence	Hope	Faith
As Experience				
Feelings of Exploration	Fun	Interest	Delight	Enchantment
Feelings of Restoration	Exhilaration	Satisfaction	Joy	Rapture
Feelings of Remembrance	Gratification	Pride	Blessedness	Reverence
As Context				
Meanings Within Event	Ascending	Ascending	Descending	Descending
Meanings Beyond Event	Ascending	Descending	Ascending	Descending

Figure 1. Play compared to three other patterns of expression.
 Thomas S. Henricks. 2015. *Play and the Human Condition*.
 Courtesy University of Illinois Press.

As activity, play is self-regulated and segmental. This means, first, that players are allowed to organize many features of the event (including choice of activity, rules and their administration, beginnings and ends, selection of participants, playing materials, and stakes). The second adjective describes the extent to which play features small strips of behavior (as in turns, times at bat, hands of cards, and so forth). Participants comprehend the overall as a succession, and sometimes as an aggregation, of these small moments.

As disposition, play features an appetitive curiosity, which leads people

into the event and, sometimes, from one stage to the next.

As experience, play (at least when successful) promotes a sequence of feelings: initial sensations of pleasing excitement and unsettlement (fun) followed by satisfying pauses and restorations (exhilaration) followed at the event's conclusion by appealing remembrances (gratification). That self-impetus and self-congratulation distinguishes play from the experience patterns of the three other behaviors listed in figure 1.

Finally, players make meaning in a distinctive fashion. Within the event, meanings arise in an ascending pattern. That is, participants comprehend the activity's emerging character and implications by recognizing and responding to a never quite predictable sequence of occurrences. Although the players try to direct the affair by employing strategies and making choices, total control proves never possible, in part because the worldly elements they are playing with usually resist their advances. But it is also common for players to create rules that include random or unforeseen elements in the action. Constructed on such terms, the play occasion exists as a fertile mix of individual ambitions and the determined interventions of otherness. Clearly, no play event is ever quite the same as another. Indeed, no two segments of the activity (those turns, times at bat, and hands of cards) are identical.

This same process extends to meanings beyond the event. Sometimes, players compete for previously agreed-upon stakes; sometimes, outside actors impose their interests on the situation. More typically, however, it is up to the players themselves to decide what a particular event will mean, either for their own lives or for occurrences in the surrounding society. Perhaps the occasion will be significant, perhaps it will not be. Playtimes can be cherished, regretted, or forgotten. And these assessments are based on what actually happens at the event. They cannot be known in advance.

I do not intend this description—however specified and arranged here—to constitute an unusual overview of play. Instead, it represents a gathering of ideas from the play studies community (see Henricks 2015). Taken together, the terms I present here provide a set of criteria for judging the relative playfulness of any event. When contrasted to the descriptions of the other three behaviors, the set of terms makes plausible a view that play is one of the foundational behavioral trajectories of humans—and of many other species. Arguably, this behavioral trajectory exists because it addresses some basic concerns, needs, or functional requirements of playing creatures as psychologically advanced organisms.

My conception of these needs (or existential concerns) emphasizes the role

of play in ongoing processes of self-realization (Henricks 2014). I use this last term quite broadly to describe all the attempts of creatures to comprehend where they stand amid the changing conditions of their lives. This means determining their general capabilities (especially skills and supportive relationships), likely patterns of worldly resistance, and pertinent emotional commitments. Stated simply, playing creatures seek knowledge of what the world is like, what they (as elements of this world) are like, and what this world allows them to do.

However, play is only one strategy of self-realization. Play's package of qualities—transforming, contesting, self-regulating, consummatory, unpredictable, fun laden, gratifying, and so forth—makes the activity an ideal testing ground for behaviors. Players are drawn to self-guided accomplishment—and to the emotional satisfactions that accompany such commitments. Actions are repeated again and again, usually with slight variations, variations that include both self-imposed modifications of the challenges the players face and innovative responses to these challenges.

The intention of the participants, or so it seems, is to become better at doing something, and, more than this, to evaluate the wide range of behaviors that are more or less effective in circumstances of this type. When trying to balance on a rock, how should I use my arms? Those two colors do not seem to go together well in my painting, so I must wipe that section out and do something else. Trying to tease my brother with that insult was not effective; let me say this to him instead.

I use the term *goal attainment* for this very basic human commitment—which is to identify goals for behavior, establish strategies for attaining those goals, implement the strategies selected, and then assess the results of those behaviors. I adapted the term from Talcott Parsons (1966, 1971), who developed a general theory of the challenges confronting organisms, personalities, societies, and cultures as *systems*. In his view, there are four basic system requirements: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and (latent) pattern maintenance. I will not describe here Parsons' broader theory, only some elements of which I find useful. His approach has been criticized, and not inaptly, for overemphasizing system stability, integration, and continuity. Just as important, or so I believe, are flexibility and change. It is surely functional for creatures to develop an arsenal of capabilities that help them respond to complicated and changing environments. Play is a process of trying out, evaluating, and consolidating action sequences.

Work, ritual, and *communitas* are also functional, albeit in somewhat dif-

ferent ways. While sharing several of play's traits, work is distinctive because it refines and uses the best personally directed strategies for meeting practical or survival needs. Workers, like animals while hunting, do not dither or explore amiably. They seek to be effective—and efficient. And because they do—and again deferring to Parsons's terminology—work is the great strategy of adaptation. Work achieves practical ends. It sustains life.

Ritual and *communitas* constitute their own pathways—each with its own function. For its part, ritual supports pattern maintenance. This means recognizing and enacting enduring principles and directives (both symbolic and physical) that orient creatures and guide their behaviors. Ritual highlights important operating procedures and engraves these into the self. Commonly, rituals are collective affairs. The group, community, or species as a whole finds its bearings through ritual events. At such times, members commit to common projects and visions of self.

Finally, *communitas* refers to the need of creatures to feel bonds of togetherness and mutual orientation. We humans—like other social animals—commune with others to experience these connections and to learn what kinds of resources they offer us. The central function of *communitas* then is integration, learning one's place in an often-complicated pattern of relationships. We seek knowledge of this type not with any specific goal in mind, but because we want the comfort and nourishment of external support. This support may come from other people, but it may also be acquired from transcendent environmental and cultural patterns or even from the foundations of our own bodies and minds. So we yearn for the love of others, enjoy beautiful sunsets, take warm baths, meditate, and attend concerts, reunions, and festivals.

Parsons and his supporters did not apply their theory about the functional requirements of systems to the four fundamental behaviors as I have done. However, I do think their general point—that systems (be these biological, psychological, social, cultural, or environmental) have ongoing requirements that transcend narrowly defined survival practices (effectively, adaptation)—is a profoundly important one. As I see it, there are different strategies for recognizing and responding to worldly occurrences that contribute to survival. Ritual, work, *communitas*, and play are all important for human well-being.

To summarize, play's special role in the process of self-realization is to help creatures realize some of the strengths and limitations of various actions. In play, we learn which goals are attainable and—at least for the time being—which are not.

Playful Variation

Empirically minded scholars may object to my suggestions this way: *Real* people do not conduct activities that conform to my conceptualization or, indeed, to any depiction of ideal types. They engage in real behaviors that, almost always, are interesting mixes of the themes I present. If real people choose to call some of these events play and to manage them on such terms, this naming of reality is enough. Scholars should recognize play for what it is: a confusing, multisplendored production that reveals people at their creative, effervescent best.

The response of the theorist—and the one I take here—is that abstract formulations like the ideas I have offered are not meant to distract researchers from the challenge of studying play in all its complexity. Neither are they calls to migrate to an ethereal realm populated only by concepts, endlessly joined and divided. Instead, the purpose of theory in play studies as elsewhere is to help people see more clearly the characteristics or aspects of occurrences. With theory in mind, real events can be identified and evaluated more effectively, particularly as variable presentations of the characteristics so named. Real events, conceived now as *more or less playful* expressions of an agreed-upon set of characteristics, can be compared profitably. Aspects of play—and their effects—can be studied with greater precision. Problematic elements can be isolated. New activities can be imagined, especially as strategic combinations of important qualities. And the relationship of the different activities and their intermeanings can be explored.

Play Patterns as Forms of Interaction

Commitments of this sort guide my strategy for thinking about play's variation. I present four different patterns of play, each one a version of the self-realization process. This realization process, I contend, is influenced by the relative status of the form or force being played *with*. In other words, self-realization arises from different kinds of encounters between the self and the other (or nonself). I discuss here four forms of encounter—essentially, relationships—between the self and other: privilege, subordination, engagement, and marginality. Each pattern of relationship poses special challenges for the self and forms the basis for its own style of play. I identify these four styles of play (and connect them to the four patterns of relationship, respectively) as construction, interpretation, dialogue, and exploration.

Let me begin with the broad topic of self-realization. Doubtless, we obtain some self-knowledge—of who we are, what the world is like, and how we are

positioned within it—through deep introspection, as Descartes maintained. We gain much more from observing directly what goes on in the world and, especially, what happens to other people who practice particular behaviors and deal with their consequences. Commonly, others tell us about their experiences, as we share ours with them. Different information that comes to us in mediated forms, that is, through books, movies, television, and other communications. More important than any of these, I believe, are direct encounters or engagements with the world, occasions when we behave in or against the world's patterns and consider what happens. Most of existence—for humans, as for other creatures—centers on such trial and error interactions.

However, our behaviors and the conclusions we draw from these behaviors are influenced profoundly by worldly forms and forces. Sometimes, we make our way through our circumstances with relative ease and gain assurance in our abilities to manage our affairs. At other times, we discover that we must bow to the forces we confront. Their will, not ours, be done. Between these extremes lie the various patterns of negotiation and compromise participants use to assert themselves in particular ways and also to adjust to what others do. Last comes a different condition, the one in which we withdraw (at least partially) from interaction and—*at a distance*—ponder what is going on and consider our next moves.

This interactional approach to self-awareness and development proves prominent in American pragmatism, which remains important in such academic fields as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and education (Murphy 1990). According to the pragmatists, individuals plan and conduct practical actions in the world, assess the reactions of the world (including those of other people) to such actions, and evaluate the implications of these for their own self-functioning. On the basis of such assessments, all of us develop anticipations of how others are likely to respond to the actions we are planning. Tentatively, we move forward in our behavior. In pragmatism, the self becomes increasingly well established in the transition to adulthood. This relatively independent and firmly fashioned self then interacts with others.

A more fluidly interactionist, or dialogical, approach remains central to some forms of European philosophy, including that presented by Martin Buber (1996). Buber argues that we effectively create, or constitute, ourselves through our relationships to the world. If we treat the world—and other people as a part of the world—as an “it,” then our self-understandings will reflect that objectification process. A similar form of awareness—distanced and effectively adversarial—occurs when we find ourselves objectified in this same way by others.

But, if we treat the world more openly and empathetically—as a “you”—then we will comprehend our own qualities and relationships in a subtler and more responsive way. Still another relationship develops when individuals function only as “I’s,” perhaps expressing their desires openly but largely disregarding what the other has to say.

Buber praised relationships of mutual respect and intersubjective exchange. He found the ideal to be the acknowledgment of the other through relatively egalitarian and intimate connections. A deeply religious thinker, he extended such ideas to individuals’ relationship to the sacred. By emphasizing dialogical, egalitarian relationships, Buber provides a worthy model for human affairs. But I believe it is important also to focus on the other styles of self-expression pertinent to different approaches to otherness. These self-trajectories—and their implications—merit study on their own terms.

My approach is to conceive of relationships based on the relative standing of the participants in relationship to otherness (Henricks 2012). As I have noted, some relationships feature conditions in which the self (let us call her the “I”) enjoys relatively high levels of control while the other has few reciprocating powers. I term this condition of command and control (from the vantage point of the self) “privilege.” The opposite occurs when the other has pronounced powers or controls over the self. This (again, from the self’s point of view) I call “subordination.” Still another pattern defines the condition of “engagement.” This occurs when both parties are involved deeply and reciprocally with one another, both asserting themselves and responding to what the other says and does. Finally, I note the condition of “marginality.” This occurs when the parties withdraw, though not entirely, from one another. Because of this withdrawal, neither the self nor the other can effectively assert oneself or claim responses. Figure 2 presents this arrangement of self-possibilities.

As you can see, I present this issue as four different types of interaction and, thus, of self-realization. But I should also stress that human involvement operates along a gradient range of commitments and counter-commitments, of assertive and responsive actions. Different situations—and relationships within these situations—offer people different opportunities to express themselves. Commonly, there may be alternations of assertiveness and responsiveness, and this is especially true in the case of play. One person, and then the other, enjoys being in charge.

Do play patterns, like other kinds of human behaviors, address the four types of involvement I describe? As I see it, some play—let us call it “construc-

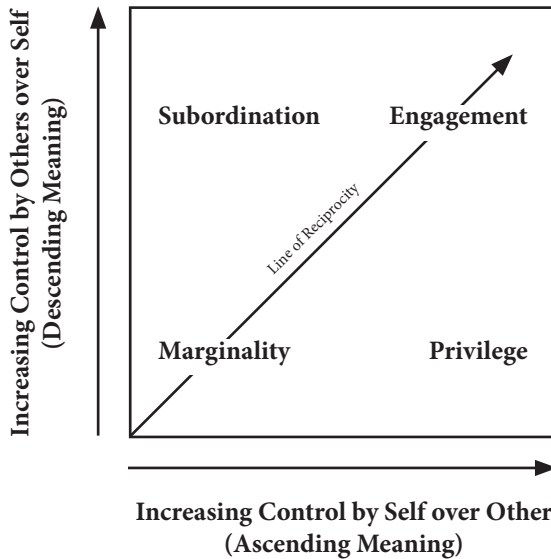


Figure 2. Four modes of self-location

tive”—expresses a relationship in which the subject has high control over the object world (the condition of privilege). A second pattern—call it “interpretive”—emphasizes acceptance of a guiding framework or format that channels creative expression (the condition of subordination). A third play pattern is the “dialogical.” This refers to engagement or interaction as a give-and-take during which both parties successfully, and more or less equally, claim the attention of the other (engagement). Finally, there is the play pattern that expresses “marginality,” where all participants stand at a distance from worldly contexts and render them, if only in their minds, creatively. This last play pattern I call “exploration.” I present the four play patterns in figure 3.

How are the four play patterns connected to my discussion of play, work, ritual, and communitas? I argue that the play pattern of construction (expressing privilege) is in some ways an anticipation of the pathway of work and, thus, shares some of work’s qualities. The play pattern of interpretation (subordination) I have described is an anticipation of ritual. Playful dialogue (engagement) I see as an anticipation of communitas. Exploration (reflecting the relationship of marginality) I find the least connected play pattern to the other basic path-

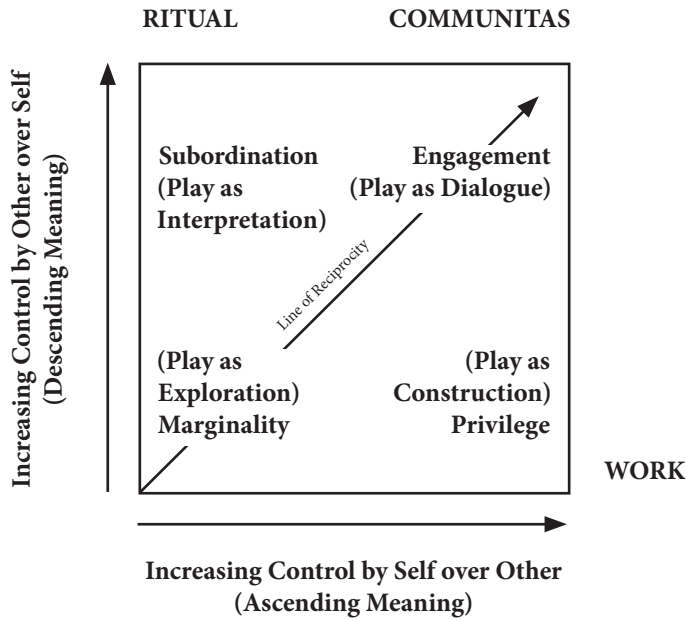


Figure 3. Four types of play and their connections to other pathways of experience

ways. Arguably, it constitutes the most basic form of play, the one that becomes extended in the other three variants. For this reason, I focus first on exploration.

EXPLORATORY PLAY—FOUNDATIONAL TO THE OTHER PATTERNS. In my approach, self and otherness interact through a series of commands, intrusions, and challenges. Participants request attention and support, either of which may be granted or denied. There is coming and going, joining and opposing. Actions in the world—both individual and collective—are evaluated as effective and ineffective. From this welter of intersecting elements, old skills and understandings are affirmed and disaffirmed, and new ones arise.

However, some of the most important kinds of play are of a less insistent, more tentative character. In these, players move along the edges of their environments—touching, sounding, tasting, and otherwise testing what is there. The players have no intention of becoming deeply involved in such settings, nor are

they serious about the meanings of what is occurring. Instead, their intention (if such a term can be used) is simply to express themselves, to make some noise (verbally or nonverbally), and to hear how the world answers.

I personally observed an example of this style of play recently. A little girl (perhaps four or five) was walking down a street with her father. In her hand, she carried a small stick that she used to bang on a succession of objects—telephone poles, newspaper boxes, fence posts, trash cans, and the like—as she encountered them. Her only desire, or so it seemed, was to feel herself in motion, to mark the world in the smallest of ways, and to hear what that world “sounded like” when so approached. Such is play in its least compromised—and thus purest—form.

Georg Simmel (1971) describes this semidetached quality in his account of the metropolitan “blasé personality,” itself an extension of Baudelaire’s “flâneur,” or market stroller. At his ease, the stroller observes the passing scene, evaluating but not reacting strongly to it. Rousing himself, he wanders through the city market, picking up items of interest, fingering them, perhaps making small comments to the vendor or to a companion, and setting the objects down. Commonly, his enthusiasm is muted; an appraising, reserved attitude prevails. The world’s affairs *are* being sampled, but at a distance. And the stroller’s connection to it is fleeting and provisional.

This style of play—fingering, fiddling, banging, fidgeting, and the like—corresponds to the marginal style of self-location I mentioned. On such occasions, individuals consult rather than engage the world intensely. They ruminate on the possibilities of things. And they imagine. Such imagining can be simply dallying, but it can also feature a more fully fledged retreat from worldly affairs into the caverns of the mind, which might be why Sutton-Smith (1997) identifies imagination as one of the central *rhetorics* of play studies. When players consult their own visions, their creative outbursts sometimes startle their audiences—and themselves. Extreme examples include seers, conjurers, and shamans. Such persons have looked within themselves and found worlds denied to those of us who live more conventionally.

Sutton-Smith (1997) also emphasizes “child phantasmagoria.” Little children—and rest of us when we are childlike—sometimes produce ideas and expressions that are undisciplined, ill formed, and scandalous. Perhaps because the outbursts astonish or otherwise unsettle those with a stronger sense of propriety, the producers seem to enjoy their creativity. And not infrequently, censorious listeners have to admit that there is a curious sense to the nonsense.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, writers and art-

ists cultivated what was termed the Romantic imagination. Exotic states of mind suddenly became fashionable, at least in some circles and sometimes abetted by psychotropic drugs. Many admired encounters with nature, especially in undomesticated forms. Occasionally, such activity—like Lord Byron’s swimming of the Hellespont—was vigorous. More often, it took the shape of meditative walks, in which the ambler mused about the meanings of existence. Commonly, the Romantics compared the timeless lessons of nature—and of steady soulful companions—to the bustle of an emerging industrial age. The Romantic era thought such meditative encounters the sources of literary, musical, and artistic creativity. It considered publicly recognized artists sensitive and special and imagined their reflections to be deeply personal.

Whatever judgments other people make of our creative exploits, we moderns tend to prize such abilities and insights in ourselves—and perhaps more so, in our children. We are fascinated by the powers that lie within us and with the products (effectively, compositions in speech, writing, drawing, music, bodily movement, and other forms of media) that emerge so mysteriously. We play to think, feel, and express ourselves, even when we suspect that we will be the only people ever to see or hear what we do.

The practice of pausing, evaluating, and planning composes a common element of play—and of play theory. Some scholars call play, at least of this very basic sort, hypothetical or suppositional (Bateson 1972). They associate it with a subjunctive mood in which an individual imagines what would happen if this or that state of affairs prevailed. Players step back from life’s ordinary requirements. They allow themselves moments of make-believe. Exploratory play—and I consider imagination to be one setting for such play—functions in several ways. In the first instance, it establishes a staging ground, a spot where we entertain life’s possibilities—even extremely farfetched ones. We may put some of these fantasies into action at some point, but most, like our dreams and daydreams, remain unfulfilled.

Exploratory play also serves as reflection. Much creative work, like that of the Romantic poets, is an occasion of remembrance. As we reminisce, we consider things we have done and, more importantly perhaps, things we could or should have done. As most of us know, the majority of things done cannot be undone, but in play at least they can be reconstructed imaginatively. Commonly, we replace our villainy with some semblance of heroism.

Exploration also flourishes in the intercessions, or pauses, of the more active kinds of play. When “we catch our breath,” we reflect on what just occurred. We

plan our next moves. We grimace as we think about the point just lost. We are buoyed by the prospect of a stirring comeback. Sometimes, our mind wanders to the other kinds of things we might be doing at this very moment, to the fun we had the last time we did this, and to more exciting times to come.

Other types of play represent the activities in which we engage when we are more deeply imbedded in the to-and-fro of situations. However, these kinds of play commonly feature periods of recuperation, reflection, and recommitment. Games commonly structure such pauses—changes of side, times at bat, periods of rest—in the activities, and their players are accustomed to stepping backward (into standings of marginality) as well as to stepping forward (into standings of privilege, subordination, and engagement). However much we want to concentrate on the action of play, we should not consider these periods of rest and recapitulation as deficiencies in the play itself. Instead, such breaks allow people time to think about what they are doing, to attend to the other (often social) aspects of the play event, and to decide how—and if—they want to keep playing. If play celebrates the ability of individuals to manage their own behavior, then such events properly include moments of reflection. Our dreams and schemes are important complements to our actions.

Once again, exploratory play may promote, or accompany, concrete actions. In some cases, it leads to stories, jokes, paintings, poems, and novels. But it also stands on its own as a key aspect of personal functioning. Human freedom centers on the ability to escape compulsivity, to do what one chooses consciously instead of what the world commands. Exploratory play establishes the metaphorical space in which the self is realized hypothetically—in fantasy, strategy, optimism, and reminiscence. Like the other forms of play I discuss, it focuses on attaining goals, but this ambition cannot be realized fully without the testing of ideas that comes from other, more active forms. So let me turn now to three other types of play: construction, interpretation, and dialogue.

CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY—AND ITS CONNECTION TO WORK. Jean Piaget's theory gives prominence to constructive play. For Piaget (1962), play—at least in its more basic forms—displays a strategy of assimilation, in which the subject tries to control the object world by submitting it to his or her own schemas of behavior and interpretation. In play, individuals attempt to control their own bodily positions and movements, external objects, and mental outlooks. Such control produces feelings of pleasure. Piaget and his camp hold this sense of increased competence and command to be a principal motivation for play. In

short, people play to become assured about their powers of agency.

Educational theorists Maria Montessori (1992) and John Dewey (1902) also emphasize this approach in which players develop particular skills and understandings through the execution and accomplishment of specific tasks. In their accounts, players identify problems then select pertinent resources and employ them in relatively self-directed ways. Players seek solutions to challenges or puzzlements; the world's responses to their efforts are measures of their success. An industrious spirit prevails.

It may be apparent that the approach I have described resembles the trajectory of work. In play of this sort, individuals complete tasks; they make things. Sometimes, the creations (like works of art) have a kind of permanence, that is, they transcend the moments of their making. Even when this is not the case, there exists a sense that something substantive has occurred—skills have been developed, judgments formed, and decisions made. Players gain confidence in their ability to confront what lies before them, then respond to various kinds of resistance, and evaluate what they have done.

Such exercises in capability partake of work's functional requirement, which is to practice and refine the strategy of adaptation. Following this strategy, some techniques prove better than others, some products superior, or at least more pleasing. Both effectiveness and efficiency count. A stack of blocks, if well built, will not fall over. A piece used in one place cannot be used in another. Big structures require careful planning and execution. Who has tried to build something and not learned these lessons?

However, as everybody knows, play is not the same as work. Clearly, play's productions are usually of little consequence, except for the psychological satisfactions of the player. In play many strategies may be tried and abandoned. The creation itself may be destroyed at the end of the sequence of behaviors. A child may build a tower of blocks mostly for the pleasure of knocking it down. Construction and deconstruction reveal themselves to be related matters. We test the character of things (and of ourselves) when we build; we test this character again when we blow down on our creations or shove them over or hit the table on which they stand to make them collapse. Play centers on processes of making and unmaking.

Nevertheless, I believe play of this type approximates work's seriousness and instrumentalism. In both activities, behaviors are linked; things accumulate. The faces of players, like those of workers, commonly reveal their determination. Sometimes, constructive play is merely a modest extension of the

pattern of exploration I have already described. On such occasions, players try to control the relatively passive or inert elements of the world simply for the purpose of seeing what they can do with them—and of seeing what these creations can withstand. The focus remains squarely on the subjective experience of the manipulator. He or she decides whether the affair was successful, what meanings to attach to it, and whether he or she had fun.

But constructive play sometimes takes a more organized, instrumental turn. Professional artists may well be playing as they put paint to canvas, but they are also intent that their finished products be well regarded. Those who exercise seriously do not just put their bodies through their paces. They are trying to achieve results—weight loss, better muscle tones, improved cardiovascular functionings. Both athletes and musicians practice hard, and their constructive play approximates the trajectory of work. At some point, its instrumental spirit overwhelms play's qualities: expertise rather than enjoyment becomes the guiding theme.

INTERPRETIVE PLAY—AND ITS CONNECTION TO RITUAL. Frequently, of course, we do not control a relatively stable or passive object world. Quite the opposite, the world often stands apart from us and remains indifferent to our commands. Sometimes, it asserts its force against us, and we can do little to resist. Think of humans confronting ocean waves, a steep hill, or even a cold, snowy day. These conditions are simply matters we must accept. Anyone wishing to play amid these elements will have to adjust to their contours. So, we surf, climb, or sled by fitting ourselves to these environments. We make our way within them but do not change them in any significant way.

This general idea—people acknowledging the terms supplied by otherness—applies to many other circumstances besides the natural environment. Our bodies have requirements—they need air, water, movement, rest, and so forth—that we cannot safely ignore. Some powerful individuals may confront us directly—think of a parent, coach, or teacher—in such a way that being with them means complying with their demands. Culture—the publicly accessible system of symbolic and material resources—is also powerful. If we want to communicate effectively, we must acknowledge the formats provided by a shared language, customs, values, and ideas. We see even some of our psychological formations in this way. Consider how we are guided by well-established value commitments, self-identities, compulsions, memories, and other directives (some of them deeply physiological). Indeed, much of our existence involves accommodating these different kinds of purposes and principles.

When people play, they acknowledge many of these forms and forces as the settings, conditions, or guidelines under which they operate. Most play activities—and this is especially true of games—involve systems of self-imposed restrictions or rules of play. Most of us would acknowledge that proper surfing, mountain climbing, and sledding (to use the examples I just mentioned) feature specific equipment, clothing, rules, and other conditions. This does not mean that a player is deprived of expressive opportunities. Quite the opposite. Precisely because we accept these formats for participation, we are able to judge the success or failure of players—and even to evaluate their commitment, virtuosity, and style—based on how they conduct themselves under the specified conditions. Individuals who approach and sometimes cross the boundaries of what we heretofore thought reasonable, or even possible, are identified as experts, daredevils, show-offs, rebels, loafers, and the like.

Artistic expression, especially in the performing arts, illustrates these themes. When we play music, dance, sing, or act in a drama, we accept the requirements of the forms we enter. As in sports and games, participants often adapt themselves to highly specialized physical equipment, recognized types or genres of expression, conventions about performance, and sometimes written directives. Settings, audiences, and support systems are pertinent as well. People express themselves under these terms. No two performances—even by the same performer of the same piece—will be identical. And we judge individual performers by distinctive standards. Who would compare a concert violinist to a jazz saxophonist? The individual performers themselves continually bring new insights, concerns, and skills to the pieces they play. We consider even the most closely regulated performances as interpretive or improvisational. Players enliven formats with their own capabilities and commitments. Indeed, it is almost impossible to play without doing so.

We can view storytelling and sociodramatic play in much the same way (Fein 1981; Paley 2005). However creative we may be, we do not manufacture these activities entirely from private resources. When we tell or perform stories, we take into account publicly acknowledged circumstances—audiences, physical settings, purposes, times of day, and so forth. We speak differently to different groups. No child wishes to hear a parent read a bedtime story in an inattentive, droning voice. Children want their parents to be animated, to bring a story's characters to life.

Play of this sort, I maintain, approximates the ritual project. In ritual, we rely on tried and true forms for expression—be these symbolic or physical—that

move us through our days. We look to, and honor, frameworks that transcend momentary circumstances. As I have noted, these forms are usually publicly recognized and shared. We embrace them with confidence because we know that other people embrace them and have done so for generations. For such reasons, ritual has as its chief purpose the clarification of values or “pattern maintenance” (i.e., the earnest inquiry into the enduring conditions that give meaning to the lives of individuals and communities). At their deepest and most serious levels, rituals invite individuals to humble themselves before the forces that guide the universe. Rituals affirm—or disaffirm—patterns thought to be foundational to existence.

Once again, I underscore that interpretive play is not identical to ritual. Rarely do players humble themselves; neither do they adopt somber and penitent expressions. Instead, they are perky and inquisitive. Sometimes they wish to demonstrate their rebellion against what others consider right and proper. Their ambition—like that of a troupe of actors putting on a show—is to demonstrate what they can do with the forms in question. Classical violinists may wish to celebrate the work of a great composer through their playing. But they also aspire to make that work feel fresh and relevant for their listeners. They may even indulge a desire to show off, to exhibit their own talents and quality of understanding. It is the task of ritual to honor the ages. Play instead adores the particular and momentary. Ritualists celebrate and reinforce external supports. Players worship personal inspiration; they prize improvisation and spontaneity.

This interpretive play combines the distinctive purposes of play (goal attainment) and ritual (pattern maintenance). Inevitably, players confront guiding formats and explore their implications. But they neither bow to those formats nor plod forward under their terms. Players enliven their circumstances; they appeal to their audiences. They perform. As I have discussed, Huizinga emphasized this combination in which humility, seriousness, and improvisation intermingle. And it remains central for anthropologists and performance theorists who apply the lessons of traditional societies to modern living (Turner 1985; Schechner 1995).

Much as constructive play may be burdened with the qualities of work (and ultimately become work), so interpretive play may be compromised by ritual’s qualities of steadfastness and consequence. By degrees, ritualized play becomes playful ritual and then ritual itself. Ultimately, people become preoccupied with the powers of otherness, and the spirit of play vanishes.

DIALOGICAL PLAY—AND ITS CONNECTION TO COMMUNITAS. So far, we have discussed three approaches to play. The first, which I consider the most basic form of play, focuses on tentative, informal explorations of life conditions. The second focuses on the attempts of individuals to manipulate weak or inert circumstances. The third stresses accommodation to—as well as creative interpretation of—the forms and forces that channel expression. A fourth style of play—intermediate to these last two—centers on a relatively balanced, reciprocal relationship between the self and the other. I call such play dialogical.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi provides one of the best descriptions of this style of interaction. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) seeks to identify activities in which individuals become deeply immersed with their own activities, a condition he terms “flow.” This quality of experience—in which participants focus completely on what lies before them, forget outside commitments, and even lose the sense of their own separation from the situation at hand—occurs when the skills of the participants match the challenges of their circumstances. For example, two equally matched tennis or chess players are more likely than two ill-matched players to be in flow. Highly skilled surgeons are often more entranced by very complicated procedures than less accomplished ones. Some rock climbers find flow in particular ascents but find others boring (or sometimes, perhaps, anxiety producing).

Csikszentmihalyi’s general point is that individuals are engaged by complicated patterns of give-and-take, which demand their full attention. Many forms of play—sports, games, debates, parties, and flirtations are examples—follow this pattern or, at least, are organized to achieve it. On such occasions, participants are encouraged to treat each other as equals, acknowledging everyone as worthy participants, taking turns, following shared rules, accepting results graciously, engaging in mutual congratulation, and so forth. Other devices—such as the equalization of sides in team play, the inclusion of random or chance elements, and handicapping—may also promote parity. At any rate, activities that allow everyone to feel they have a chance to participate effectively constitute good play.

Huizinga (1955) stressed such qualities of give-and-take in his agonistic (social contest) view of play. So did Sutton-Smith (1978) in his dialectical theory. Both scholars recognized that involvement of this sort, even when directly competitive, commonly promotes feelings of camaraderie. The willingness of participants to embrace a framework of mutual obligation and respect proves fundamental to this type of play. So understood, the play event becomes something that people build together (Vygotsky 1976; DeKoven 1978).

Such themes may also remind the reader of Huizinga's idea of festival, or what I call *communitas*. Many events in our own society—parties, fairs, picnics, reunions, and the like—are not intended to achieve explicit, instrumental goals. Instead, they are occasions for people to come together, share information, and deepen their relationships. These events are often light-hearted affairs. But *communitas* can also feature a meditative, even serene quality. Humans bond in many ways: they listen attentively to soulful music; they take quiet walks together; they embrace in times of consolation and love. These too are moments for reconnection, for understanding where one stands in the broader community and what kinds of support this community may provide. Commonly, such events are set apart from daily routines. Places and times may be taken over by the new commitments. There may be invitations and announcements. Special manners, clothing, food, gifts, and displays provide additional definition. Who of us does not know that a party goer, concert attender, or love maker has a special role, the principal objective of which is to contribute to the character of the event and to reaffirm the value of everyone involved?

As I see it, activities like these have a central function to fulfill the human need for integration. Most of us long to feel connections to other people—and to the world in general. We want to be in the midst of things. *Communitas* is a search for boundaries—both those that shelter and support us and those that resist and endanger us. We join with others to sense what they—and we—can do. Play theorists tend to combine play and *communitas* in their accounts of human festivity, but in my view, these are different matters. *Communitas* stresses the role of otherness in helping individuals understand their own possibilities. Love is perhaps its greatest example, but its finest lesson is responsibility, learning to do something not because others make us do it but because we wish to be responsive to that which stands beyond us.

We can see dialogical play as an approximation of *communitas* or as a mixture of these two pathways of experience. That is to say, play addresses the key concern of *communitas*—integration or bonding—but it does this in a way that showcases the role of individual creativity instead of mutual accommodation. Play celebrates what individuals, as subjects, can do to the world they live in. It teaches the pleasures and pitfalls of self-directed strategies. It empowers individuals by refurbishing self-managed resources. In contrast, *communitas* identifies transcendent resources—other people, the wonders of the earth, the companionship of the sacred, the coursing of the mind—as supports for personhood. Dialogical play joins this quest for integration with that of attaining goals.

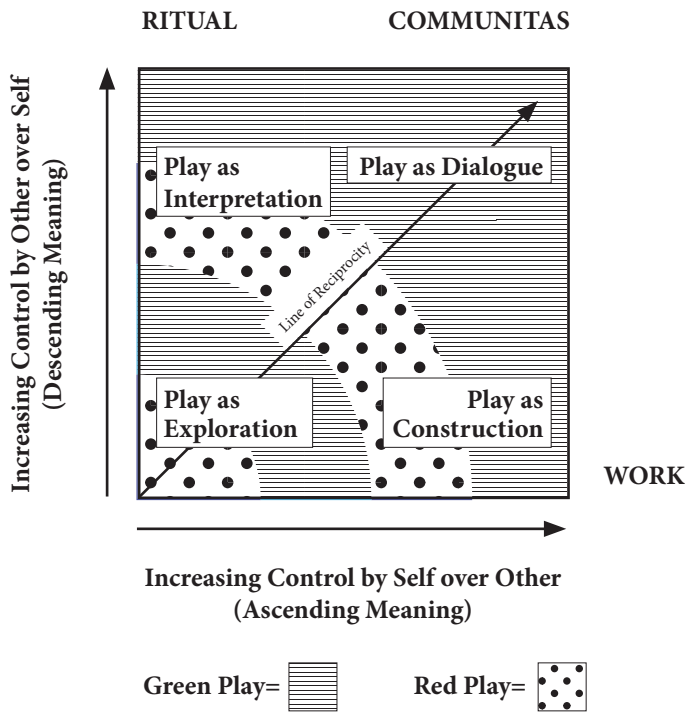


Figure 4. Green play and red play (orderly and disorderly versions of play)

As in all the types of play I have discussed, dialogical play can abandon its guiding principles and turn into something else. Communal play turns into playful communion and then into *communitas* itself. The desire to join and bond replaces high-spirited creativity.

Green Play, Red Play

Even in their quieter, more reflective moments, players are restless. Fiddling with ideas and images, they want to try out their visions. Thus, they are agents of change, seeking to transform the conditions of their existence. But how should they make these changes? In my final section, I consider two ways of thinking about play as change making. The first—what I call “green play”—emphasizes activities that seek order. The second—“red play”—emphasizes activities that dissemble and disrupt. I apply these two perspectives to the four types of play I

have discussed—exploration, construction, interpretation, and dialogue—and reconsider their meanings (see figure 4).

Green play is what most of us imagine when we consider creative activity. When we create, we construct something that did not exist before, at least not in its current configuration. Usually, judgments about creativity center on qualities imputed to some stable outcome or product, like a drawing or a sand castle. But creativity may also refer to more fluid expressions, as when we speak, sing, or dance. In any case, creators impose form on the world; they make something for others (including the makers themselves) to reflect upon as a model for living. Creative expressions, when successful, offer a coherent set of meanings—logical, moral, aesthetic, and practical. Possessed of such understandings, individuals see their lives differently than they did before.

By contrast, red play divides and disorganizes. It unsettles things built. It scatters the remains. Sometimes, it questions the very premise of order making. Red players scribble over their own (and others') drawings; they kick down sand castles. In so doing, they celebrate the ability of every individual to resist continuity and the dictates of form. Red players are iconoclasts, anarchists, and rebels; they thwart lifeways of every sort.

The philosopher Nietzsche offers perhaps the best-known example of this very broad distinction. Pondering the pre-Socratic world in his early work, Nietzsche (2008) contrasts two ritual traditions. The Apollonian tradition emphasized orderliness, harmony, cooperation, enduring ideals, and patient reasoning. The alternate tradition, the Dionysian, stressed wildness, sensuality, and acceptance of the endless instabilities and rivalries of life. Dionysian cults encouraged sexual excess and drunkenness and otherwise defied society's proprieties. Mystery, irregularity, and randomness were claimed to animate the world. For his part, Nietzsche mourned the cultural dominance of the former tradition in the transition to modernity. Wild inspiration, or so he thought, has been sacrificed to circumspect routine (Sprioso 1989).

Of course, we nonphilosophers understand these opposing commitments well enough. Sometimes, we try to construct patterns that serve as steady guides for ourselves and others. At other times, we revel in inconsistency, impertinence, and escape. By turns, we accept and reject the directives of public culture and its groups. We may support—or disavow—our own beliefs and values. Usually, we are clear which course we are following. And we recognize play as a safe place to investigate these complementary themes.

I describe green play and red play as rival directions for the four play types.

Before doing so, I wish to make two points. First, it is important to acknowledge that the green and red principles are not infrequently elements of the same play event. Routinely, people must tear down parts of their construction so that they can build again. In a game, rivals usually agree to a shared framework of playing rules and social behaviors. They compete—essentially, to destabilize one another’s positions—under these conditions. They may congratulate each other after the game. In other words, themes of assembly and disassembly may provide a rhythm to the activity.

I wish to present the second point as a question: Is it possible for either the red or green pattern to be developed so extremely that it effectively undermines the character of the play? This circumstance is perhaps easier to envision in the case of red play, where the commitment to disorder negates the possibility of further communication or, indeed, damages the persons involved. But green play’s commitment to orderly communication and harmony may also become overextended. When adults excessively control children, or when players themselves focus too much on orderly behaviors and solutions, do they defile the spirit of play? I consider examples of both these extremes.

GREEN AND RED EXPLORATORY PLAY. Consider play in its most tentative, diffuse, and personally preoccupied form. Green play describes explorations that attempt to build stable understandings. People play to learn—about the world, to be sure, but also about themselves as potentially forceful agents within their world. Green play both consults and consolidates. Players want to learn what personal resources they can count on.

Jerome and Dorothy Singer can be considered proponents of green play in its exploratory form. In *The House of Make-Believe* (1990), they argue that imaginary play has, as its latent function, the creation of a “theory of mind.” Children at play learn that their thoughts and feelings are just that, psychological events they create, control, and inhabit. They recognize the reality of their own thoughts to be distinguished from the thoughts of other people and from other worldly occurrences that go on without their awareness or influence. When children play imaginatively, they consult these mental productions and evaluate their respective merits. The same can be said for the development of personal skills. Which of these, in their many applications, produces which effects? The business of play is to develop increasingly coherent understandings of how the world operates. We play, tentatively, to figure things out—to learn what will happen if we perform one action rather than another.

Red play opposes this quest for coherence and control. In such instances—think about willful foolishness, drunkenness, disruption, and disrespect—we try to destabilize our surroundings. More intimately, we try to get out of control ourselves. That quest, it may be recalled, was central to one of Roger Caillois's (2001) well-known types of play, which he called *ilinx* (or vertigo). Just as Middle Eastern whirling dervishes or Mexican *voladores* countermand their own pretensions of control by submitting to the centrifugal forces of the world, so many other individuals—through drugs, jumps, crashes, and other masochistic actions—explore their own undoing (Caillois 2003). Part of this behavior may be an attempt to discover what stands beyond ordinariness or simply to learn what one can endure. But also—and surely more profoundly—one intention is to dissolve the self, at least in its more conscious and idealized forms. If play is change making, then the self—like any other element in the world—can be dissembled by acts of will.

At some point, this dissembling becomes inimical to play. When imagination surrenders to the powers of personal compulsion—as in the extreme cases of drug dependency, drunkenness, and psychic obsession—it thwarts play's deeper purposes. At some level, players seek control over their life conditions or at least the capability to respond willfully to them. But too much control—from other people or from oneself—makes play static and bounded. As the Singers have stressed, parents and teachers have a rightful place as guides to children's imaginative development. But no child wants to be told when to laugh, how to act silly, or what to fantasize about in his or her moments of private exploration.

GREEN AND RED CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY. Constructive play, when players control relatively inert or passive elements, illustrates the green-red dichotomy clearly. In this type of play, things get made and unmade. And in between is all manner of rearrangement and reconsideration.

The workshops of the Institute for Self-Active Education, led by Walter Drew and Marcia Nell exemplify green constructive play. Commonly, workshop participants enter a room filled with a wide assortment of small, inanimate objects. Choosing from that assortment, the players create new forms. Usually the makers try to fashion something from the piles of materials, although this is not required by the workshop leaders. Typically, they respect each other's creative processes, not stealing resources or otherwise interfering. Sometimes they work together. Creations may be photographed, approvals exchanged. Then everything is taken down and the materials are returned to their boxes. At the

end of this process, participants reflect on their acts of making and on the possible sources and implications of these. They share their reflections with others. As a result, they make participants more conscious of the factors that guide expressive behavior, in play and elsewhere (Nell and Drew 2013).

This sort of civil engineering is important for children and adults. But it is easy enough to imagine a red style of construction. What if the activity of individuals disrupted creations (their own and others'), taking them apart, smashing them, or even piling them up and setting them on fire? Should destruction of this sort—the demolished sand castle or crumpled drawing—be considered play? What about minor acts of vandalism, when people assault the property of others? Should play include activities that coerce or intimidate relatively defenseless persons or animals, as in bullying or other forms of abuse?

Typically, play scholars exclude behaviors like these from their conceptions of play because such behaviors tend to be overly consequential. Abusive behaviors violate the principle that play should be consummatory; that is, its meanings should be confined to the event itself. There is some sense that individual players should be allowed to disrupt their own activities because these involve self-administered choices. And it is presumed that the individuals will stop themselves before they do real harm. But more modest forms of red play surely lie within play's latitudes. If play is an exercise in self-assertion, then it is just as important to see how things are taken apart in play as to see how they are put together. And red play exhibits well consummation's other meaning: that something is now finished, scattered, and ingested, perhaps never to return.

Can constructive play become overly green? Green players can become too formulaic and timid in their choices. Like students in an art class, they can be driven by the desire to create a worthy object, something to hang on the wall or offer as a gift. Emphasis of this sort—on following instructions, presenting a well-rendered product, and receiving acknowledgment of success—makes play pallid and safe. The same can be said for unadventurous activity on a playground. Players, to build their abilities, need resistance from the objects they confront and difficulty from their self-imposed challenges. Play is best served when it includes failure as well as success, willful unsettlement as well as easeful relations, and an unpredictability that confounds the easy course.

GREEN AND RED INTERPRETIVE PLAY. As I have described it, interpretive play refers to activities that confront well-established forms and forces, whether these are symbolic or physical in character. In the green version, players accept,

for the most part, these guiding frameworks. They play music by following the printed sheet set before them and by accepting the directions of the conductor. They keep their instrument in tune and otherwise adjust themselves to the expectations of their audience and fellow players. Much the same can be said of the surfer who adjusts to the character of the oncoming waves and tries not to interfere with surfing companions. Within these latitudes, creativity—recognized as personal and collective improvisation—occurs.

Anthropologists have stressed how players accommodate themselves in similar ways to the prevailing symbolic resources of their culture (see Schwartzman 1978). Through play, children learn by enacting important beliefs, values, norms, and skills. They face manufactured predicaments that test their abilities to employ such resources effectively. In the process, they gain approval (and disapproval) from others. By participating in games, they essentially operate under the terms of texts, which reproduce the challenges of social living. But, of course, individuals do not always conform in such ways and thus narrow the range of their creativity.

Sometimes, play events function as countertraditions or antistructural responses to dominant patterns (Geertz 1973). That red style—think of Carnival—offers what Bakhtin (1981, 1984) describes as a “second world” expressing alternative beliefs, values, norms, and skills. Dominant views are set aside, if only for duration of the holiday. Redder yet are less systematic forms of resistance to cultural patterns. Individuals defy authority figures and flout convention. Miscreants shout vulgarities, vandalize property, and disrupt organizational routines. Behaviors like trading illicit notes and images, marking walls with graffiti, and photo bombing apply. Sutton-Smith (2017) has stressed the importance of rebellion, especially through illicit jokes and stories, for children’s development. Children (and the rest of us) enjoy opportunities to show that we are not to be managed easily.

To be consistent with what I have said, I believe these tendencies can be overdeveloped, at least if we wish to call the event play. At some point, rebellion becomes the desecration of personal and social meaning. Activities like hacking into computers or defiling websites impose real damage on real people. However, pleasurable these interventions may be, I do not believe we should call them play.

Nor should we overpraise green play in its excess—the ritualized conformity of the stately march, the dutiful pledge, or the cheerless company song. These may be personal enactments, but they are little more than that. To play interpretively, people must make new and vibrant what lies before them.

GREEN AND RED DIALOGICAL PLAY. We can analyze play relationships between relatively equal, or well-matched, participants in similar terms. Green play appears especially important to the development of play communities. Bernie DeKoven is an important proponent of this idea. In *The Well-Played Game* (1978), he emphasizes that community building by participants is more important than either partisan success or the technical skills developed through playing. Instead, the well-played game acknowledges the worth of all participants, promotes social coordination, and reaffirms the importance of human connection. The so-called “new games” ethic, of which DeKoven remains a guiding figure, supports activities that promote collective spirit and transcend division based on gender, class, and race.

Sutton-Smith (1997) calls community identity a principal rhetoric of play. In traditional societies, public events emphasize mutual allegiance and reaffirm group traditions. At such times, individuals show that they belong with the others present, that they support the values guiding the event, and that their own individual creativity should be understood in these terms.

The red style of play finds expression in forms of power and partisanship. Huizinga (1955) developed this as the *agon*: Sutton-Smith (1997), labeled it the *rhetoric of power*. Many sports and games, political debates, legal contests, episodes of teasing, and the like stress antagonism. Acclaim goes to winners; calumny, to losers. Groups show who they oppose by teaming up against them. Usually, this partisanship gets mollified by some recognition of common rules, the acceptance of results, and some mutual respect. But extreme versions of the *agon*—as in some forms of contemporary politicking, legal wrangling, and commercial big-league sports—may submerge these unifying qualities. Is there a red style of play—antisocial or asocial—that goes beyond this? I think of the doings of cheats, complainers, and spoilsports who care little for the satisfactions—or the regard—of others. They play at the expense of others. So do bullies, vandals, and thieves. And we must see Internet activities like trolling and lurking not only as cultural incursions but as assaults on the real persons.

Antisocial activities of this sort quickly destroy the conditions of mutual respect, shared rules, and limited consequences that most people associate with play. Dialogical play is built on the premise that all participants acknowledge the legitimacy of each other’s concerns, that they have a relatively equal standing in the community at hand. This is the theme developed by both Buber and Csikszentmihalyi. Individuals flourish when they engage themselves intimately with others, when they acknowledge their responsibilities. But too much respon-

sibility, propriety, and obeisance also deforms play's character. By their nature, players are impertinent and demanding. They wish to show what they can do. They want to have their claims acknowledged, their desires satisfied.

Extremely green play blocks the personal impulsiveness that seeks these ends. To be sure, integration (the function of *communitas*) constitutes a key human commitment. But play is more than bonding and immersion. Players are fanciful and willful. They want to make their mark on circumstances. The wish for order, harmony, and stable forms must not distract players from their equally strong desire to feel the changing energies of the moment. Players do not seek resolution; they wish to feel themselves alive in the shifting circumstances of the world.

Conclusions

I have developed the thesis that playful behaviors, despite their impressive variability and mutability, are united by a common commitment. That commitment is self-realization, pursued in a distinctive way. Players seek to know what they can do in—and to—the world. For players, this world includes not only external forms and forces but also their own psychological and physical capacities. Individuals play to change themselves. I have described this distinctive behavioral strategy, functional for personal and social well-being, as goal attainment. Acts of play involve the identification of behavioral objectives, the consideration of limiting conditions and resistances, and the selection of strategies. We try out these approaches, evaluate them, refashion them, and then try them again. So, we test ourselves by balancing on a log, playing a hand of cards, performing a dramatic role, or teasing a friend.

Play acquaints people with this very important life commitment, but the commitment is not the only one worth pursuing. It is difficult to imagine a satisfying life without the critical contributions of work, ritual, and *communitas*. These equally important behaviors grant us the abilities and forms of awareness pertinent to adaptation, pattern maintenance, and integration, respectively. All life's activities feature self-positioning and selection of resources for behavior. For its part, play focuses on building—and rebuilding—the personal frameworks useful for addressing upcoming challenges, both those we anticipate and those we do not. So conceived, play celebrates the possibilities of subjective agency. Players hypothesize and experiment, and they judge success by the personal satisfactions of their explorations.

Whatever play's unifying qualities, clearly such activity takes many forms. I have identified four of these play forms: exploration, construction, interpretation, and dialogue. I have associated these with four styles of self-location: marginality, privilege, subordination, and engagement. I have found all four play forms to be guided by the commitment to self-realization, to be focused as the attainment of goals.

It seems to me, exploratory play, the expression of marginal involvement with one's environment, is foundational for the other forms of play. Focusing most clearly on imaginative speculation, this type of play prepares the way for more involved play, providing interludes during its activities and prizing reflection about past events.

The other three play forms—construction, interpretation, and dialogue—represent more protracted involvements with the external world. More than that, these kinds of play tend to display qualities similar to work, ritual, and *communitas*, respectively. For such reasons, their functions often seem mixed or blurred with those of the other behaviors. Constructive play, as we have seen, mimics and anticipates work in some ways. Because it does, work-like play blends goal attainment with adaptation. Interpretive play, similar to ritual in some ways, mixes goal attainment with pattern maintenance. Dialogical play, joined with themes of *communitas*, combines qualities of goal attainment with integration.

All these forms can have a more orderly or more disorderly focus, what I have called green play and red play. Green play expresses the desire to have orientation systems that are both solid and coherent. Such play seeks comprehensible solutions and guiding principles. It creates something others can recognize, admire, and compare productively to the things in their own lives. It helps us believe that the world—and we ourselves—can become better than we are now.

By contrast, red play takes down these productions. It destabilizes orientation systems. Commonly, red play is adversarial in spirit. Because it is so, red play reveals divisions in society not only between social groups but also between individuals and any group that would claim their allegiance. Red play challenges cultural ideals and conventions. It rebels against the steadying influences of both body and mind. Although this dissimulation or questioning process may seem distracting or counterproductive, it is very important for human functioning. Red play identifies and responds to current problems and tensions. It clarifies social and personal divisions. It resists complacency. It reveals new opportunities for change.

Such themes are commonly mixed in the real behaviors that scholars study empirically. The combination of themes may be complicated enough to support claims about play's being ambiguous, multisplendored, and paradoxical. But I have stressed that identifying play's principal forms, functions, and "colors" in a systematic way helps researchers comprehend more effectively what occurs when people engage in such activity. There are many avenues to self-realization. And it is important to consider which of these pathways leads in which directions and produces which forms of awareness.

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