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DEFINING PLAY

game play
ludic activities
being playful
free play
transformative play

Any earnest definition of play has to be haunted by the possibility that playful enjoinders will render it invalid.—**Brian Sutton-Smith**, The Ambiguity of Play

Introducing Play

The design of meaningful play, in whatever form the play might take, demands an understanding of how rules ramify into play. The play of a game only occurs as players experience the rules of the game in motion. Before a game begins, the many formal components of the game-system lie in wait: an empty football stadium; Chess pieces resting in their starting positions; a game program installed on a hard drive. Only when the players enter into the game does the system

come fully to life. Athletes and fans spill into the stadium; Chess pieces sally forth one by one from their starting positions; a saved game file is loaded and the game fills the screen. Dormant relationships spring up between game elements as players inhabit, explore, and manipulate the game's space of possible play.

From a formal point of view, the rules of a game indeed constitute the inner "essence" of a game. But there is a danger in limiting the consideration of a game solely to its formal system. The complexity of rules has an intrinsic fascination, the hypnotic allure of elegant mathematics and embedded logic. However, it is crucial for game designers to recognize that the creation of rules, even those that are elegant and innovative, is never an end in itself. Rules are merely the means for creating play. If, during the process of game design, you find yourself attempting to perfect an elegant set of rules in a way that fails to impact the experience of the player, your focus has become misdirected. The experience of play represents the heart and soul of the game designer's craft, and is the focus of all of the chapters collected under the Primary Schema of **PLAY.**

Following this introductory chapter are a number of schemas, each one framing games from a different perspective. Within **PLAY**, we explore games as systems of experience and pleasure; as systems of meaning and narrative play; and as systems of simulation and social play. We are aware of the near-infinite variety of ways to frame games as experience and we make no pretense that our set of **PLAY** schemas offer a complete list. There are experiential schemas that offer valid ways of understanding games which we did not include. We don't, for example, look at play as an experience of learning, or at play as a kinesthetic system of movement. The schemas included offer a starting point for an ongoing discussion of game design and play, a discussion that is only just beginning.

What Is Play?

As psychologist J. Barnard Gilmore notes in *Child's Play*, "Certainly everyone knows what play is not even if everyone can't agree on just what play is."[1] The psychological and anthropological study of play has resulted in a range of definitions, from a formulation of play as

"activities not consciously performed for the sake of any result beyond themselves" to a conceptualization that "play refers to those activities which are accompanied by a state of comparative pleasure, exhilaration, power, and the feeling of self-initiative."[2] Although these definitions may tell us something about play, we want to build a more design-centric definition of the concept, one that will help us create an experience of meaningful play in our games.

Let us start by looking at how play is used in everyday speech. As with "game," the word "play" is used in many and varied ways:

- the act of creating music, such as *playing* the radio or *playing* a musical instrument
- pretending: *playing* at being angry, *playing* the fool
- activating a process: putting something into *play*
- taking a risky action: *playing* fast and loose
- the course of events or fate: letting things *play* out, *playing* into the hand of fate
- stalling: *playing* for time
- being joking or not serious: just *playing* around, *playing* tricks
- gambling: *playing* the horses
- a subtle effect: a smile *playing* on the lips, the *play* of light on the wall
- the loose space between gears or cogs: the *play* of a car's steering wheel
- fooling or deceiving someone: *playing* someone for all they're worth, *playing* on someone's feelings, *playing* up to someone
- being artful, clever, or youthfully jubilant: dressing in a *playful* style, engaging in *wordplay* and, of course,
- *playing* with toys or *playing* a game

Whereas we "play" games such as Metal Gear Solid, Racquetball, and UNO, there seem to be many other activities that fall under the category of play and playing as well. What is the connection between the terms "play" and "game"? When we defined the word *game* in

chapter 7, we posited two possible relationships between games and play:

> ***Games are a subset of play:*** Games constitute a formalized part of everything we might consider to be play. Playing catch or playing doctor are play activities that fall outside our definition of games (a contest of powers with a quantifiable outcome, etc.). However, although not all play fits the category of games, those things we define as games fit within a larger category of play activities.
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> ***Play is an element of games:*** In addition to rules and culture, play is an essential component of games, a facet of the larger phenomenon of games, and a primary schema for understanding them.

Neither one of these two relationships is more correct than the other. The first is a *descriptive* distinction that places the phenomenon of games within a larger set of real-world play activities. The second is a *conceptual* distinction that frames play as an important facet of games. However, the common uses of "play" in English point to other understandings of the concept, which fall completely outside these two framings of "game" and "play." Making a *playful* gesture, for example, or the *play* of the waves on the beach—these examples don't seem to have anything at all to do with games. Or do they? Looking over all of the ways that play manifests, we can group them into three categories of "play:"

Game Play

This form of play is a narrow category of activity that only applies to what we defined already as "games." Game play is the formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game and experience its system through play.

Ludic Activities

The word ludic means *of or relating to play* and like the title of Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens*, it is derived from *ludus*, the Latin word for play. Ludic activities are play activities that include not only games, but all of the non-game behaviors we also think of as "playing:" a kitten batting a ball of yarn, two college students tossing a Frisbee back and forth, children playing on a jungle gym.

Being Playful

The third category of play is the broadest and most inclusive. It refers not only to typical play activities, but also to the idea of being in a playful state of mind, where a spirit of play is injected into some other action. For instance, we are being playful with words when we create nicknames for friends or invent rhymes to tease them. We might dress in a playful way or deliver a critique of a sibling in a playful tone. In each case, the spirit of play infuses otherwise ordinary actions.

Each of the three categories of play is successively more open and inclusive. As a category, ludic activities includes game play, and the category being playful includes both of the previous two. Game play is really just a special kind of formalized ludic activity. Similarly, ludic activities are formalized, literal ways of being playful.

A General Definition of Play

Although these three categories bring the many expressions of play into focus, we still lack a general definition to assist us in designing experiences of meaningful play. There is, in fact, a way of defining play that does justice to all three categories:

Play is free movement within a more rigid structure.

At first glance, this definition might seem a little spare and abstract for such a rich and complex topic such as play. But it is an extremely useful way to think about the design of play. Where does the definition come from? Think about the use of the word “play” in the sense of the “free play” of a gear or a car’s steering wheel. The “play” is the amount of movement that the steering wheel can move on its own within the system, the amount the steering wheel can turn before it begins to turn the tires of the car. The play itself exists only because of the more utilitarian structures of the driving-system: the drive shaft, axles, wheels, and so on. The “rules” created by these

elements make the free movement of play possible. Play emerges from the relationships guiding the functioning of the system, occurring in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play is an expression of the system, one that takes advantage of the space of possibility created from the system's structure.

As a formal way of conceptualizing play, this definition applies to all three categories of play:

> ***Game Play:*** Playing a game such as Chutes and Ladders occurs only when players set the rigid rules of the game into motion. But the game play itself is a kind of dance that occurs somewhere between the dice, pieces, board, and the rules themselves, in and among the more rigid formal structures of the game.
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> ***Ludic Activity:*** Think of bouncing a ball against a wall. This play activity has a less formal structure than a game, but the definition of play still applies. In experiencing the play of the ball, the player is playing with structures such as gravity, the material identity of the ball, the architectural space, and his or her own physical skill in throwing and catching. To *play* with the ball is to play with all of these structures, testing their limits and boundaries, finding ways of moving around and inside them.
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> ***Being Playful:*** Even in this broad category of play the definition is relevant. Using playful slang, for example, is to find free movement of words and phrases within the more rigid rule structures of grammar. Being playful while walking down the street means playing with the more rigid social, anatomical, and urban structures that determine proper walking behavior.

In every case, play exists *because* of more rigid structures, but also exists somehow in *opposition* to them. Slang is only slang because it departs from the grammatical norm. It is oppositional to the more staid and conservative "official" uses of language, and gains its identity through its difference from them. Similarly, bouncing a ball against a wall is at odds with more utilitarian uses of the architecture. At the same time, the action conforms to certain rules afforded by the formal structure of the building, leading to a particular type of interaction. The play of a game, as we have explored in detail, is only possible because of rules. Yet paradoxically game play is in many ways the opposite of rules. In all of its many guises, play

opposes and play resists. But it does so *playfully*, making use of existing structures to invent new forms of expression.

Transformative Play

When play occurs, it can overflow and overwhelm the more rigid structure in which it is taking place, generating emergent, unpredictable results. Sometimes, in fact, the force of play is so powerful that it can change the structure itself. As philosopher James S. Hans notes, "The role of play is not to work comfortably within its own structures but rather constantly to develop its structures through play."[3] A playful slang term can become an idiom, for example, and may eventually be adopted into the dictionary, becoming part of the larger cultural structures it originally resisted. We call this important form of play *transformative play.*

Transformative play is a special case of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape. The play doesn't just occupy and oppose the interstices of the system, but actually transforms the space as a whole. A cyberfeminist game patch that creates transsexual versions of Lara Croft is an example of transformative play, as is the use of the Quake game engine as a movie-making tool.

Although every instance of play involves free movement within a more rigid structure, not all play is transformative. Often, whether or not we can consider play as transformative play depends on the way we frame the play experience. Take the familiar example of Chess. Some aspects of play in Chess are, by and large, not transformative at all. As with most games, the formal rules of Chess do not change as a result of playing a game of Chess. If the play of Chess is considered purely as an exercise in the strategic logic of Chess, then the system (the rules) remains the same each time the game is played. However, once human players come into the equation, transformative play can occur across many levels. A player's thinking skills might be transformed as a result of playing Chess over a long period of time. Social relationships with other players (or non-players) might undergo a transformation. The play of Chess might

even transform the way a player perceives objects in space. (Just ask any Tetris addict!)

Transformative play can occur in all three categories of play:

> ***Game Play:*** In professional Basketball, as players find new ways of playing the game, the rules are adjusted to keep the game challenging and entertaining. There are many examples of games, from Flux to 1000 Blank White Cards, where inventing and transforming the rules are part of the game's design.
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> ***Ludic Activity:*** In informal, imaginative children's games, such as House or Cops and Robbers, the rules and possible behaviors are often improvised, transforming the play of the game from session to session.
>
> ***Being Playful:*** In fields and activities outside what we normally think of as play and games, being playful can have a transformative effect. In fashion design, there is a reflexive relationship between marginal forms of dress and the fashion establishment. A subcultural style of dress can challenge notions of taste and etiquette (think Punk), while helping to define new forms of expression within the very context it opposes.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, we explore the three types of play in more detail, with an eye to discover how each category intersects with our general definition of play, transformative play, and game design.

Being Playful

> *If we examine how the word "play" is used and concentrate on its so-called transferred meanings we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of the components in a bearing case, the inner play of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words . . . . This accords with the original meaning of the word "spiel" as "dance," which is still found in many word forms.*—Brian Sutton-Smith, **The Ambiguity of Play**

We start with the largest of the three categories: simply being playful. The preceding quote from Sutton-Smith points to some of the many contexts outside of games, toys, and ludic behavior to which we can apply our general definition of "play." Like the "free play" of a gear, the instances of play identified by Sutton-Smith are all moments

when a system is in motion, in a kind of dance. ("Spiel," the German word for play, originally meant *dance*, as Sutton-Smith points out.)

Take Sutton-Smith's example of a "play on words." There are many kinds of wordplay, from the nonsense rhymes of Dr. Seuss, to the rhythmic intricacies of freestyle rap, to the semantic doubling of a children's riddle. In every case, the wordplay embodies free movement within a more rigid structure. If you will pardon the cheesy humor, consider the following joke:

Q: Why is six afraid of seven?

A: Because seven ate nine.

The "play" of this particular joke rests in the fact that "ate" and "eight" are homonyms. Saying "seven eight nine" is merely counting, whereas "seven ate nine" becomes a genuine cause of alarm for our personified numerals. What is happening in this instance of play? Within the more rigid and fixed sets of linguistic meanings, the joke has managed to carve out a space of play, a movement in which unexpected characters come to life and express double meanings usually repressed within more utilitarian communication. The joke "plays" on our expectations of language. But without the larger context of conventional language use in which the joke takes shape, the joke would lose its humor and sense of play. The play exists both *because of* and *in opposition to* the structures that give it life.

Even if we use some of Sutton-Smith's more abstract examples, such as the play of light, our definition of play still applies. Imagine light reflecting from your wristwatch to make a bright spot on the wall: we say that the light is *playing* on the wall. From within the structures of the physics of light, perception, and architecture emerges the unusual circumstance of a floating speck of light on the wall. The light playfully calls attention to itself, changing the relationship between your wristwatch and the architectural space. Your instinct is to play with the light, even for just a moment, to experience this new set of relationships between the movements of your body and the surface of the wall. The play of the light, and your

play with the play of the light, is only made possible by the ordinary sets of experiential relationships that this instance of play transforms.

Are these examples of "being playful" transformative as well? Possibly. Maybe the play of the light transforms your behavior: perhaps you make a habit of sitting in the same room at the same time the next day to enjoy the possibilities of the play. Or maybe telling the "seven ate nine" joke at dinner leads to an entire evening of math jokes that wouldn't otherwise have occurred. Every instance of play carries with it the seeds of transformative play.

How is this general understanding of being playful relevant to game design? When you are designing a game, you should maximize meaningful play for your participants at every possible moment. Often, this means thinking about how you can inject the proper spirit of playfulness into an otherwise ordinary behavior. You Don't Know Jack, for example, took the normally chore-like routine of entering in player names, loading game data, and outlining game rules and turned it into an entertainingly playful series of events that even experienced players of the game continue to enjoy. Could you make an entire game out of an experience that is typically ordinary or tedious? How about a game designed to be played while waiting in line? Or watching the news? Or driving a car? Once you understand that play is latent in any human activity, you can find inspiration for play behaviors and contexts anywhere.

Ludic Activities

The second category of play, *ludic activities*, brings us closer to the play of games. Games represent one type of ludic activity, a particularly formalized variety of play. But there are many less formal versions of play as well, from two dogs chasing each other in a park to an infant playing peek-a-boo with his father. What most often distinguishes games from these other forms of play is the fact that games have a goal and a quantifiable outcome. Generally speaking, non-game forms of ludic activities do not.

Even though ludic activities constitute a type of play phenomena more narrow than simply being playful, there is still a relatively wide range of activities contained within this category. How might these activities be organized and understood within the larger rubric of play? Anthropologist Roger Caillois suggests a useful model for organizing various forms of play. In his book *Man, Play, and Games*, he provides a powerful framework for classifying play activities. Caillois' model is one of the most theoretically ambitious attempts to organize the many forms of play.

Caillois' model begins with four "fundamental categories" of play:[4]

- *Agôn:* Competitive play, as in Chess, sports, and other contests
- *Alea:* Chance-based play, based in games of probability
- *Mimicry:* Role-playing and make-believe play, including theater and other exercises of the imagination
- *Ilinx:* Playing with the physical sensation of vertigo, as when a child spins and spins until he falls down

Here are some of Caillois' thoughts about each fundamental category:

> *Agôn.* A whole group of games would seem to be competitive, that is to say, like a combat in which equality of chances is artificially created, in order that adversaries should confront each other under ideal conditions, susceptible of giving precise and incontestable value to the winner's triumph.[5]
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> *Alea.* This is the Latin name for the game of dice. I have borrowed it to designate, in contrast to *agôn*, all games that are based on a decision independent of the player, an outcome over which he has no control, and in which winning is the result of fate rather than triumphing over an adversary. More properly, destiny is the sole artisan of victory, and where there is rivalry, what is meant is that the winner has been more favored by fortune than the loser.[6]
>
> *Mimicry.* Play can consist not only of deploying actions or submitting to one's fate in an imaginary milieu, but of becoming an illusory character oneself, and of so behaving. One is thus confronted with a diverse series of manifestations,

> the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or makes others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.[7]
>
> *Ilinx.* The last kind of game includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind . . . . Every child very well knows that by whirling rapidly he reaches a centrifugal state of flight from which he regains bodily stability and clarity of perception only with difficulty.[8]

Caillois'categories cover a wide range of play activities. Some of them, such as the game contests of agôn and the chance-based games of alea, resemble many of the games we have already discussed. Other activities he mentions, such as the make-believe play of mimicry and ilinx activities like leapfrog and waltzing, clearly fall outside the boundaries of games. Although many games include elements of mimicry and ilinx, these categories go beyond a description of games—but they do outline a model for understanding many kinds of ludic activities.

Caillois doesn't limit his classification system to these four categories. He enriches his taxonomy by adding the pair of concepts *paida* and *ludus.* Paida represents wild, free-form, improvisational play, whereas ludus represents rule-bound, regulated, formalized play. Caillois writes: "Such a primary power of improvisation and joy, which I call *paida*, is allied to the taste for gratuitous difficulty that I propose to call *ludus*, in order to encompass the various games to which, without exaggeration, a civilizing quality can be attributed."[9] Caillois crosses his four fundamental categories of play with the concepts of *paida* and *ludus*, resulting in a grid on which he charts a wide variety of ludic activities. A rule-bound game of chance such as Roulette falls into the alea/ludus section of his model. Unstructured make-believe play like wearing a mask would fall under mimicry/paida.

Terminological Aside: "Play" and "Games" in French

Man, Play, and Games was written in French, Caillois'native tongue. Many languages do not have separate words for "game" and "play." In French, for example, game is "jeu," and play is "jouer," the verb form of the same word. The original title of his book is *Les Jeux et les Hommes* (Games/Play and Man); the English translation of the title as *Man, Play, and Games* does an admirable job of expressing the broad array of play forms Caillois investigates.

It is important to note the difference between the French and English titles of Caillois' book because although the English translation generally uses "game" to describe what Caillois is studying, for our purposes he is, in fact, studying play. Some of the phenomena listed by Caillois are bona fide games and sports. Others, like theater and public festivals, do not fit our narrow definition of game. They are all, however, ludic activities.

	Paida	Ludus
Agôn (Competition)	Unregulated athletics (foot racing, wrestling)	Boxing, Billiards, Fencing, Checkers, Football, Chess
Alea (Chance)	Counting-out rhymes	Betting, Roulette, Lotteries
Mimicry (Simulation)	Children's initiations, masks, disguises	Theater, spectacles in general
Ilinx (Vertigo)	Children "whirling," Horseback riding, Waltzing	Skiing, Mountain climbing, Tightrope walking

Examples taken from Man, Play, and Games

How does Caillois'model fit into our definition of play? A look at the four fundamental categories of play shows that each embodies free movement within a more rigid structure:

- *Agôn* and *alea* are categories that generally contain games. As a result, play emerges from the players' movement through the rigid rule-structures of the game. In a competitive game, players do their best to win by playing within the behavioral boundaries set by the system of rules. In a game of chance, players set the game in motion through their participation, hoping the system plays out in a fortuitous manner.

- The free of play of *mimicry* is the play of representation. If you wiggle your index finger and say "hello," pretending that your finger is a little person that can talk, you are playing with the fixed representational categories of finger and person, finding free movement within these more typically rigid sign systems through imaginative play.
- Play in *ilinx* emerges as the play within physical and sensual structures. The spinning player abandons more typically tame behavior to find new sensation in the interplay between bodily movement and perceptual input.

Furthermore, the categories of *ludus* and *paida* directly address a structural understanding of games, a continuum of relationships between structure and play. As play edges closer to the ludus end of the spectrum, for example, the rules become tighter and more influential. Located on the other end of the spectrum, paida-based play eschews rigid formal structures in exchange for more freewheeling play. In both cases, Caillois defines play by virtue of its structural identity.

There is a good deal of correspondence between Caillois' model and our own. However, the two models do not offer identical ways of conceptualizing play. For example, our distinction among game play, ludic activities, and being playful is not relevant to Caillois' organization of play activities. Although we can frame his categories under the rubric of our "free movement" definition, he never explicitly constructs play in this way.

Caillois is a tremendously important game scholar. His system for classifying forms of play is one of the most inclusive and robust we have encountered. Furthermore, Caillois' model can be very useful for understanding the kinds of play experiences your game is and is not providing. Although Caillois tends to place an entire game or play activity into a single section of his grid, most games have elements from several of his categories. Maybe your hardcore agôn strategy game could be leavened with a bit more alea. Or perhaps you could enrich your mimicry-based role-playing game by considering the kinds of ilinx sensations your players might experience at key

dramatic moments. Any model that helps you to frame your design problems in a new way can be a valuable game design tool.

Game Play

The third and final category of play is game play. Just as ludic activities constitute a special subset of the larger category of being playful, game play is a special subset of the category of ludic activities. Game play only occurs within games. It is the experience of a game set into motion through the participation of players. The other two categories of play, being playful and ludic activities, contain a vast and diverse array of play forms. Yet even though game play is the smallest category of the three, the play of games takes on a multitude of forms as well: the strategic competitive play of Settlers of Catan; the performative social play of Charades; the physical sporting play of Cricket; the lush narrative play of Final Fantasy X—all are examples of game play.

Game play clearly embodies the idea of play as free movement within a more rigid structure. The particular flavor of a game's play is a direct result of the game's rules. The rules of Charades, written out as text on paper, could not be more different from the exuberant, free-wheeling activity of the game itself. Yet these rules provide the rigid structure within which the play resides, the rules that guide and shape the game play experience. As Caillois himself states, within a game a player is "free within the limits set by the rules."[10]

Because play involves human participation, it is an endlessly rich and complex locus for study. Even within a single game, there are innumerable ways to delineate its play. In the following excerpt, taken from *The Study of Games*, Norman Reider begins an in-depth study of Chess by touching on many of its characteristics:

> The fascination and the extent of the addiction to the game; the psychological factors involved in its historical development; its social and therapeutic value; its legal involvements; its relation to love and aggression; the problem of genius in chess; the characterological problem of its players and their style of play; and ego functions as manifested in play, especially the distinctions

between the psychological meanings of the game, its pieces and rules, and the psychology of the players.[11]

Most or all of the "facets" Reider lists are ways of understanding the operation of play in a game. The psychology of play, the expression of love and aggression, the way that the game facilitates individual styles of play, are part of the play experience of Chess. Understanding the experiential qualities of play, engendered by rules and given life through game play, is the precise focus of the rest of this Primary Schema. Are you ready to play?

Delimitation of our project

Although the number of writings on game design is somewhat limited, in the past few decades, there has been a tremendous amount of study on the nature and function of play. Scholarship comes from a wide variety of fields: animal behaviorists studying the adaptive advantages of play, developmental psychologists studying the cognitive and social skills that children learn through play, sociologists studying the way play fits into larger social needs.

By and large, these studies of play focus on identifying the function or purpose of play. The implicit assumption is that play serves a larger purpose for the individual psyche, the social unit, the classroom, the species, and so on. In *Child's Play*, Frank A. Beach indexes some of the functions that are typically associated with play across many fields:

- a release of surplus energy
- an expression of general exuberance, or Joie-de-vivre
- expression of sex drive, aggression, or anxiety
- youthful "practice" for adult life skills
- necessary context for exploration and experimentation
- a means of socialization
- tool for self-expression and diversion[12]

Studying the function and purpose of play is important and fascinating work, but we will not address it in this book. The schemas we present for understanding play and other aspects of games focus on the challenges of creating meaningful play, rather than on investigating the social or psychological *purpose* of games. There is a tremendous amount of literature available on the function of play and we have

included many of these references in our bibliography, as it should be a part of the way that game designers understand games.

Notes

1. J. Barnard Gilmore, “Play: A Special Behavior.” In *Child’s Play*, edited by R. E. Herron and Brian Sutton-Smith (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971), p.311.
2. Ibid.
3. James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p.5.
4. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), p.12.
5. Ibid. p.14.
6. Ibid. p.17.
7. Ibid. p.19.
8. Ibid. p.23.
9. Ibid. p.27.
10. Ibid. p. 8.
11. Norman Reider, “Chess, Oedipus, and the Mater Dolorosa.” In *The Study of Games*, edited by Elliott Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971), p.440.
12. Frank A. Beach, “Current Concepts of Play in Animals.” In *Child’s Play*, edited by R. E. Herron and Brian Sutton-Smith (New York: John Wiley & Sons,1971), p.311. p. 204–208.

Defining play
SUMMARY

- The play of a game is the **experiential** aspect of a game. Play in a game occurs as the game rules are set into motion and experienced by the players.
- The relationship between games and play can be structured in two ways:
  - **Games are a subset of play:** Games constitute a formalized part of all activities considered to be play.
  - **Play is an element of games:** Play is one way to frame the complex phenomenon of games.
- All of the different phenomena of play behavior can be organized into three categories:

Game Play: the formalized, focused interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game in order to play it.

Ludic Activities: non-game behaviors in which participants are "playing," such as two tussling animals or a group of children tossing a ball in a circle. Game play is a subset of ludic activities.

Being Playful: the state of being in a playful state of mind, such as when a spirit of play is injected into some other action. This category includes both game play and ludic activities.

- A general definition of play: play is free movement within a more rigid structure. Play emerges both *because of* and *in opposition to* more rigid structures.
- **Transformative play** is a special kind of play that occurs when the free movement of play alters the more rigid structure in which it takes shape. The play actually transforms the rigid structure in some way. Not all play is transformative, but all forms of play contain the potential for transformation.
- Anthropologist Roger Caillois classifies play according to four "fundamental categories:"
  - **agôn:** competitive play
  - **alea:** chance-based play
  - **mimicry:** simulation or make-believe play
  - **ilinx:** vertigo or physically-based play

Each of these categories can be plotted along an axis that runs from **ludus**, or rule-bound play to **paida**, or free-form play. Many games possess several of these characteristics of play at once.