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4 PLAY

The joker in the deck

Playing, like ritual, is at the heart of performance. In fact, performance may be defined as ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play. How and why this is so is the subject of this chapter. Ritual has seriousness to it, the hammerhead of authority. Play is looser, more permissive – forgiving in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid. To put it another way: restored behavior is playful; it has a quality of not being entirely "real" or "serious." Restored behavior is conditional; it can be revised. Playing is double-edged, ambiguous, moving in several directions simultaneously. People often mix bits of play – a wisecrack, a joke, a flirtatious smile – with serious activities in order to lighten, subvert, or even deny what is apparently being communicated. "I was just kidding" reflexively claims that the "for real" action was in fact a performance. This claim in favor of playing points to the kind of performing associated with the arts, with creativity, with childhood. It is not a claim that stands up well to the technical or business applications of performance.

Play is very hard to pin down or define. It is a mood, an activity, a spontaneous eruption. Sometimes it is rule-bound, sometimes very free. It is pervasive. Everyone plays and most people also enjoy watching others play – either formally in dramas, sports, on television, in films; or casually, at parties, while working, on the street, on playgrounds (**see figure 4.1**). Play can subvert the powers that be, as in parody or carnival, or it can be cruel, amoral power, what Shakespeare's Gloucester meant when he cried out, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, | They kill us for their sport" (*King Lear*, 4, 1: 38–39).

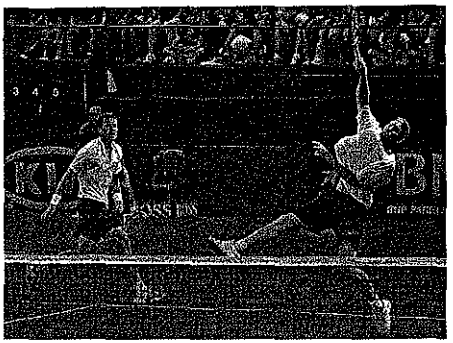
Victor Turner called play the "joker in the deck," meaning it was both indispensable and untrustworthy (**see Turner box**). Indeed, in Western thought, play has been both valued and suspect (**see Spariosu box 1**). From the **Enlightenment** through the nineteenth century, a strong effort was made to rationalize play, to control its anarchic expressions, to channel it into numerous rule-bound, site-specific games and various official displays enacted as public, civic, military, or religious spectacle. An effort was made to assign specific places for playing and to limit playtime to after work or Sundays (and then, when the working week shrank, to the weekend or "days off"). For any society depending upon industry, maintaining the measured regularity of the assembly line is necessary for the creation of wealth. Play has to be kept off the line as much as possible. But the best laid plans. . . . People keep playing furiously, if not always publicly. The more historians learn of rapidly industrializing Victorian Britain, for example, the more they discover secret gardens of play. Drunkenness was endemic on the job and off; workers played hooky to gamble and whore; lunchtime dime theatres drew crowds of child laborers. These and other practices played havoc with the official doctrine of orderly production. Maintaining discipline in the factories was a major undertaking.

A change in how play was regarded began at the turn of the twentieth century, and it has accelerated ever since. Play returned as a category of creative thought and action. Notions of the **unconscious** in psychology and literature, theories of relativity and uncertainty (or indeterminacy) in physics, and game theory in mathematics and economics are examples of play taken seriously. In the visual arts,

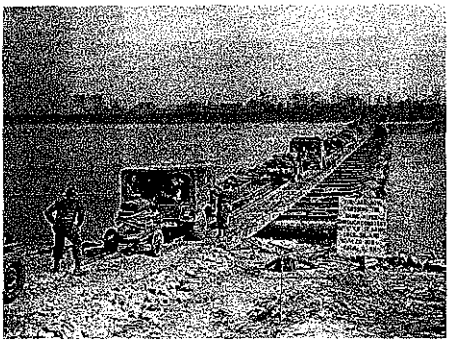
fig 4.1. Some of the varieties of play and playing. The actual diversity and range is endless: what is depicted here is but a small sample.

A school playground in Northhamptonshire, UK, 1988. Photograph by Brunskill. Copyright Popperfoto.

fig 4.1. (Continued)



Canada's doubles team Frederic Niemeyer (right) and Daniel Nestor return the ball to Venezuela's doubles team José de Armas and Johny Romero in a Davis Cup semifinal, Valencia, Venezuela May 2005. AP Photo/Leslie Mazoch. Copyright EMPICS. Reproduced with permission.



"War Games" – during the Second World War. Notice the playful sign, "You are now crossing the Rhine River through courtesy of E Co . . ." Photograph from *After the Battle Magazine*.

Victor Turner

The joker in the deck

Playfulness is a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence, which cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength, in modes of simulation such as theatre, and in controlled disorientation, from roller coasters to dervish dancing. [. . .] Most definitions of play involve notions of disengagement, of free-wheeling, of being out of mesh with the serious "bread-and-butter," let alone "life-and-death" processes of production, social control, "getting and spending," and raising the next generation. [. . .] Play can be everywhere and nowhere, imitate anything, yet be identified with nothing. [. . .] Play is the supreme bricoleur of frail transient constructions, like a caddis worm or a magpie's nest. [. . .] Its metamessages are composed of a potpourri of apparently incongruous elements. [. . .] Yet, although "spinning loose" as it were, the wheel of play reveals to us (as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued [1975]) the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to be reality.

1983, "Body, Brain, and Culture," 233–34

playing with ordinary reality – inventing new ways to look at things – led to cubism and then abstract expressionism. Various avant-gardes disrupted, parodied, and playfully subverted official culture. Play is intrinsically part of performing because it embodies the "as if," the make-believe. Much recent thinking on play accords it an important place in human and animal life. In Indian philosophy, play is the very ground of existence.

Mihai Spariosu

Return of the repressed

Although Plato and Aristotle convert heroic and tragic poetry into "fiction" or "literature," subordinating it to the serious and moral truth of metaphysics, the ancient agon between the poets and the philosophers comes back again and again to haunt Western thought. Whenever prerational values attempt to regain cultural supremacy, what has been repressed under the name of "literature" or "art" as mere play and illusion also reasserts its claim to knowledge and truth, that is, its claim to power. Faced with this challenge or threat, the modern philosophers may react in two ways: they either reenact the Platonic suppression of prerational values, relegating them again to the realm of "mere" art and play (the case of Kant); or they wholeheartedly embrace these values, turning literature or art into an effective weapon against their own philosophical opponents (the case of the artist-metaphysicians [Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida]).

1989, *Dionysus Reborn*, 162

Enlightenment: European philosophical movement originating in the eighteenth century but continuing to the present championing rationality, empirical reasoning, the rule of law, both natural and human, and universal ethical, political, aesthetic, and scientific values.

unconscious: as theorized by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), thoughts, feelings, impulses, or memories of which we are not aware, and over which we have no or little control. The unconscious manifests itself in dreams, as slips of the tongue, forgetting, compulsive behavior, and the like.

What is play? What is playing?

Is playing different than "play"? Do the activities called "playing" directly correspond to the phenomenon called "play"? What do playing baseball, playing poker, playing around with your boy/girlfriend, playing a role in a play, playing the fool, letting some play into your fishing line, and playing out an idea have in common? Are fantasy, dreaming, and daydreaming kinds of interior playing? Is playing always fun? Is it always guided by rules or can it be unpredictable? Is playing prerational, rational, arational, or irrational? How has the idea of playing figured in Western and non-Western philosophies and cosmologies? Do animals play in the same way as humans do? Do adults play in the same way as infants and children do? What are the connections between ritual and playing (**see Handelman box 1**)? Between art and playing? Between the earliest human cultures and playing? Is war a kind of playing? These questions do not exhaust what can be asked. There are more questions than can be answered – and this is a significant aspect of the whole "problem" of play and playing.

Don Handelman

Complementarity of play and ritual

Ritual and play are shadow images of one another in the kinds of messages they transmit to the social order. They are analogous states of cognition and perception, whose messages are complementary for the resolution of the ongoing, immoral, deviant, domain of ordinary reality.

1977, "Play and Ritual: Complementary Frames of Metacommunication," 190

If the dichotomies dividing play from work, serious business, and ritual are too rigid and culture-bound; if it is wrong to fence children's play off from adult play; if playing need be neither voluntary nor fun; if play is characterized both by flow – losing oneself in play – and reflexivity – the awareness that one is playing; if ethological and semiotic studies show that play's functions include learning, regulating hierarchy, exploration, creativity, and communication; if psychoanalysis links playing with fantasy, dreaming, and the expression of desires; if the "in between" and "as if" time-space of playing is the source of cultural activities including arts, sciences, and religions . . . can we ever really understand something so complex?

You might regard the writing I am doing at this moment as a game played in order to bring the multiple possibilities of play and playing under the aegis of rational thought. Indeed, a principal task of scholarly writing is to find discipline within or impose it on seemingly anarchic phenomena.

This tension between the orderly and the unpredictable – the rational rule of law (human or other) versus the throw of the dice – is irresolvable. But it is comprehensible as the struggle between two kinds of playing. The first kind of playing is where all players accept the rules of the game and are equal before the law. The second kind of playing is Nietzschean, where the gods (fate, destiny, luck, indeterminacy) change the rules of the game at any time, and therefore, where nothing is certain.

Some qualities of playing

Playing is a genetically based lifelong activity of humans and a number of other animals. Playing consists of play acts, the basic physical units of playing and gaming. Though it is not easy to separate play from games, one can say that generally games are more overtly structured than playing. Games are rule-bound, occur in designated places ranging from stadiums to card tables, have definite outcomes, and engage players who are clearly marked (sometimes with uniforms). Play can take place anywhere at any time engaging any number of players who may abide by or unexpectedly change the rules. Most play acts are governed by rules that the players agree to play by. Games from tennis and chess to improvisational theatre and war games are governed by rules that control the moment-to-moment playing. But there are also many play acts with no articulated or published rules, or with rules that change during playing, as in fantasy or "kidding around." Sometimes playing is anti-structural, with the main fun being how one can get around the rules or subvert them.

Adult playing is different from children's in terms of the amount of time spent playing and the shift from mostly "free" or "exploratory" play to rule-bound playing. However, some adults arrange their work so that they may continue to play in much the same ways that children do. Artists are not the only adults who are given leave to "play around." Researchers in science and industry, and even some business people, are able to integrate play into their work. Both child play and adult play involve exploration, learning, and risk with a payoff in the pleasurable experience of "flow" or total involvement in the activity for its own sake. Playing creates its own multiple realities with porous boundaries. Playing is full of creative world-making as well as lying, illusion, and deceit. Play is performance (when it is done openly, in public) and performative when it is more private, even secret – a strategy or reverie rather than a display. This interiority separates play from ritual, which is always be enacted. Games – a special kind of playing – depend on more fixed, solid boundaries. In the card game of blackjack, having an ace and a face card is a sure winner (**see figure 4.2**). In baseball, the umpire shouts "You're out!" and the player leaves the field; being "offside" draws a penalty in football.

Playing can be physically and emotionally dangerous. Because it is, players need to feel safe, seeking special play spaces and play times. The perils of playing are masked by asserting that playing is "fun," "voluntary," "ephemeral," or a "leisure activity." These are modern Western beliefs. In fact, much of the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one's head, engaging in "deep play," to use **Jeremy Bentham**'s term as developed by **Clifford Geertz**. In deep play, the risks to the player outweigh the potential rewards. I will have more to say about deep play when later in this chapter I discuss its close relation, "dark play."

fig 4.2. A happy gambler raking in her chips after winning at blackjack. Copyright image 100/Alamy.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832): English philosopher and social reformer whose theory of utilitarianism asserted that the best society was the one that provided "the greatest good for the greatest number." Bentham proposed *The Panopticon* (1791), a plan for prisons, hospitals, insane asylums, and schools where all the inhabitants could be continuously and simultaneously observed. His most influential work, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), focused on the ethics of law, language, and government.

Clifford Geertz (1926–): American anthropologist, innovator of interpretive anthropology, an approach that treats cultural activities as comprehensible texts. Author of many books, including *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (1980), *Local Knowledge* (1983), and *Available Light* (2000).

Seven ways to approach play

I offer seven interrelated ways to approach play and playing not as a definitive list, but as a strategy for organizing the inquiry into play.

1 Structure: What are the relationships among the events constituting a play act? How, for example, how does an "at bat" fit into the structure of an inning in baseball; and how does each inning relate to the shape of the entire game? Each play act consists of many sub-acts, distinct behavioral units that fit together into a coherent whole. [A coherent sequence of play acts forms a game.[

2 Process: Over time, how are play acts generated and what are their phases of development? Again, to use baseball as an example, how do the strategies of play change as the game progresses; or how do the score, weather, injuries, and so on affect emerging strategies of play?/Process and structure should be considered as a related pair. /

3 Experience: What are the feelings and moods of the players and the observers? How do these affect playing? What are the different experiences of players, spectators, scholarly observers, directors, organizers, and so on? How do differing feelings and moods change over the course of play, affecting the playing itself? Are spectator sports more affected by the "home field advantage" than informal games or more intimate playing (make-believe, riding a swing or seesaw, erotic foreplay)? How does one determine whether the play has been "good" or not?

4 Function: What purposes do play acts serve? How do they affect individual and community learning, growth and creativity, distribute and express aggression, act out myths, fantasies, or values . . . or any number of other possible "uses" play has? What are the economic consequences of any particular play act or genre of play?

5 Evolutionary, species, and individual development of play: What is the relationship of human play to animal play? What are the differences between child play and adult play? What is the relationship between playing and individual creativity? What is the relationship between play and culture – especially creativity, the arts, and religion?

6 Ideology: What political, social, and personal values does any specific playing enunciate, propagate, criticize, or subvert – either knowingly or unconsciously? Are these values the same for all players, spectators, and observers? And if there are differences, how are these expressed and negotiated?

7 Frame: How do players, spectators, and so on know when play begins, is taking place, and is over? How is the message "now I am playing" broadcast and received? And what about "dark" or risky play, where the message "this is play" is intentionally omitted or disguised, such as in con games or in Augusto Boal's **InvisibleTheatre**? Is "I want to stop playing" the same as "I am finished playing?"

Invisible Theatre: a performance technique developed by Augusto Boal where an action is staged in a public place for an "audience" of bystanders who do not know that what they are witnessing is a theatrical performance. An Invisible Theatre event almost always has a political meaning.

The rest of this chapter is an investigation of these seven ways to approach play and playing. However, these ways cannot be separated out from each other as sharply as I have done in the list. Many of these ways overlap each other. Therefore, the discussion will move among these seven rather than discuss each one after the other.

Types of playing

Roger Caillois classifies play and games into four categories:

1 Agon or competition. Games where there are winners and losers. The outcome is determined by the skills and/or strength of the players. Examples: races, weightlifting, chess.

2 Alea or chance. Games where fate, luck, or grace determine the winner. Examples: dice, roulette.
3 Mimicry or simulation. Playing within an imaginary, make-believe, or illusory world. Examples: theatre, children's make-believe play.
4 Ilinx or dizziness. Playing to induce a disorienting experience or state of mind. Examples: spinning, roller-coaster rides, getting "crazy drunk."

Roger Caillois (1913–78): French sociologist, play theorist, and anti-fascist. Founding editor of *Diogenes* published under the auspices of the United Nations. Author of *Man, Play, and Games* (1958, Eng. 1979).

This division is useful if one realizes that actual playing and gaming more often combine categories than keep them distinct. For example, poker involves both agon and alea, with more than a touch of mimicry thrown in (the famous "poker face" worn by the best players). Greek tragedies draw power and pathos from a combination of alea and agon – fate and conflict – while the stage performances of the dramas are mimicries. "Musical chairs" and "ring around the rosy" combine ilinx and agon. Carnival masquerading combines all four categories. And so on. Caillois himself recognized this, pointing out that horse racing combines agon, alea, and mimicry.

Caillois emphasized the reciprocity between any given society and the games it plays (**see Caillois box 1**). Most play theorists agree that play both expresses and drives social life. The disagreements come over what kinds of playing are preferable. Professional athletes and gamblers play for money. Business people and politicians exploit gaming techniques. Playing "mind games" in order to control other people is a social skill. Scams, stings, and con games are endemic. Some theorists, such as **Brian Sutton-Smith** see playing as largely a means of exercising power (**see Sutton-Smith box 1**). Caillois and others prefer the disinterested play of "gentleman amateurs," which they regard as a mark of high culture. The darker kinds of play Caillois calls "corruptions" evidencing a decline in "civilization." Caillois is imagining (or proposing) a golden age when people with time to spare play by the rules. In this Utopia, violent, irruptive ecstasy is rare and strictly governed; there is little reliance on chance or fate because people live rationally. Plato was the first in the West to imagine such a world. In China, **Confucius** proposed a similarly rational code for living.

Roger Caillois

A society is the games it plays

[There is] a truly reciprocal relationship between a society and the games it likes to play. There is indeed an increasing affinity between their rules and the common characteristics and deficiencies of the members of the groups. These preferred and widely diffused games reflect, on the one hand, the tendencies, tastes, and ways of thought that are prevalent, while, at the same time, in educating and training the players in these very virtues or eccentricities, they subtly confirm them in their habits and preferences. Thus, a game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilized to define the society's moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities.

1979 [1958], *Man, Play, and Games*, 82–83

Brian Sutton-Smith

Play and power

Considerations of play and power come under various names, such as warfare, hegemony, conflict, competition, glory, manliness, contest, and resistance. Some of these are quite ancient terms historically, preceding the modern rhetorics of progress, the imaginary, and the self. [. . .] In modern times, however, the concept of power has also been applied in play theory to solitary play: the child plays because he enjoys the power of being a cause, or because he doesn't have power and in play is seeking empowerment as a kind of compensation or wish fulfillment. On the social play level, the general idea of the power rhetoric is that play or games or sports or athletics that have to do with some kind of contest and reflect a struggle for superiority between two groups (two people, two communities, two tribes, two social classes, two ethnic groups, two or more nations) exist because they give some kind of representation or expression to the existing real conflict

between these groups. Whichever side wins the game or contest is said to bring glory to its own group, bonding the members together through their common contestive identity. Furthermore the two groups typically have in common their enthusiasm for this kind of contest, which may thus unite rather than divide them.

1997, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 75

Brian Sutton-Smith (1924–): New Zealand-born folklorist and play theorist. Author of numerous works on play, including *Play and Learning* (1979), *Toys as Culture* (1986), and *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997).

Confucius (551–479 BCE): Chinese moral philosopher and poet. Confucianism – a code of conduct based on his teachings – was the official religion of China until 1911, and is still widely practiced.

Play acts, play moods

In any given play situation there may be both players and observers. The observers may be actively involved in the play – as fans or avid followers of the game; or they may be more disinterested witnesses. There are also professional watchers, the referees and judges who make sure that the playing is going by the rules or who determine who wins, who loses. It is possible to be playing from the perspective of the observers but not be playing, or at least not be in a play mood, from another point of view. The roaring Romans in the Coliseum delighted in the gladiatorial games as play, while the gladiators themselves were not playing. Modern bullfights resemble the gladiatorial games, with the odds fixed strongly in favor of the matador (**see figure 4.3**). The bull is not playing, the matador is both playing and not playing, and the spectators are enjoying the blood sport. Indeed, professional sports present a particularly complex situation. A lot of hype goes into convincing fans that the players are in it "for the love of the game." Probably many players enjoy playing at a professional level. But clearly money and stardom also count for a lot. Furthermore, the players on the field are only the most visible parts of an extremely elaborate network of managers, owners, and media joined to real estate, government, and corporate interests. At what level does the play stop and something else begin? At all levels of professional sports, playing is implicated with other activities.

Hindsight can transform a serious event into play. Watching home movies, for example. Or television programs like *Candid Camera*. The popularity at the turn of the millennium of "reality television," as well as access to hundreds of webcams streaming over the internet, are variations on the candid camera theme. Who is playing in these situations? And when does the playing take place? The

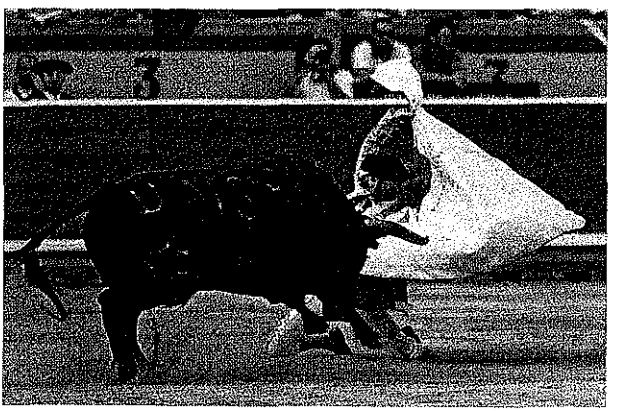


fig 4.3. A bullfight at Pamplona, Spain, 1997. Spanish bullfighter Pepin Liria executes a pass while on his knees – this is called a "larga cambiada." Copyright Reuters.

playing is relocated to the playback; or if the program is live, the players are more like athletes engaged in a contest. With the webcams, the playing is more or less "unconscious," the delight voyeuristic. In a scam, sting, or practical joke the targets are part of a play event, but do not know it; the other participants must keep up the illusion of seriousness; the audience (friends, the police) use the event either as an occasion for amusement or as evidence. In the case of a scam, it is important to the perpetrators that there be no audience, ever.

Play acts often serve multiple, contradictory purposes simultaneously. What's fun for the cat is not for the mouse. Among the Aztecs and Mayans of Mesoamerica, ball-playing fulfilled many functions. People played ball just for fun and to show off skills. The hard rubber ball, which was knocked without touching it with the hands, ranged in size from about 8 inches in diameter among the Aztecs to 18 inches in the Mayan game (see **figure 4.4**). Often there were large bets riding on a game with valuable textiles wagered (the Mayans and Aztecs did not have money as such). Sometimes the ball game was a matter of life and death. Captives especially were forced to play – and lose both the game and their lives. Such ritual games built community solidarity and confirmed the superiority of ruling deities and kings, even as it brought death to those selected for sacrifice.

If play acts themselves are not necessarily fun, neither are the processes that generate play acts always playful. Sports training and practicing often involve hours of grueling effort proving the adage, "no pain, no gain." Filming a motion picture is more tedious work, involving lots of boring repetition and waiting, than it is play. On the other hand, sometimes the processes involved in preparing can be more enjoyable than the outcome. Many people report that workshops and rehearsals are a lot more playful and satisfying than the finished products. Thus there is no necessary relationship between process and product. Either, both, or neither may be playful.

Moods are especially labile, shifting suddenly and totally. Observe a children's playground. A kid can be laughing one minute, crying the next, angry the next, and laughing again a moment later. All of these moods are part of the playing. Or the playing can go over the edge, in humans as with animals. In the midst of a hotly contested match, play can suddenly turn venomous and deadly. Only in well-organized games – which constitute a minority of play acts – is the situation always under control. And even in such well-managed situations, an injury to a player or spectator, or a fight on the field or in the stands, can suddenly break the play mood. Once the wounded player is carried from the field, or order restored, play resumes.

Though it is not easy to separate play from games, as noted earlier, generally games are highly structured events with clearly marked players playing in/on specified places, fields, or boards. Games have established agreed-on rules that guarantee an orderly progression to definite outcomes. Even one person can play a game – such as a crossword puzzle or solitaire; or one can compete against an imaginary or programmed opponent as in computer chess or pinball.

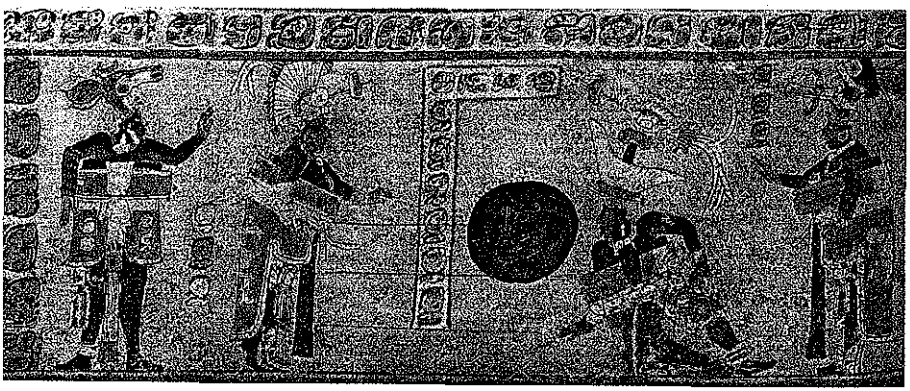


fig 4.4. A Mayan ballgame as depicted on a cylindrical vessel, 600–800 ce. The illustration is a "roll out" – the cylinder has been photographically extended into a flat plane. Note the large size of the ball. Four ball players are shown. Photograph by Justin Kerr.

Games can range from single instances to "seasons" that take months to complete. The Olympic Games renew themselves every four years. **James P. Carse** divides games into "finite" and "infinite" (**see Carse box**). A finite game moves toward resolution, while the goal of an infinite game is to keep on playing. Cultures are infinite games. The ultimate infinite game is the open-ended play that sustains existence.

James P. Carse (1932–): American theologian, author of *Death and Existence* (1980), *Finite and Infinite Games* (1986), and *Breakfast at the Victory: The Mysticism of Ordinary Experience* (1994).

James P. Carse

Finite and infinite games

There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing play. [. . .] The rules of a finite game are the contractual terms by which the players can agree on who has won. [. . .] The rules of an infinite game must change during the course of play. [. . .] The rules of an infinite game are changed to prevent anyone from winning the game and to bring as many persons as possible into the play. [. . .] To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself. [. . .] Since culture is itself a poiesis, all of its participants are poietai. – inventors, makers, artists, storytellers, mythologists. They are not, however, makers of actualities, but makers of possibilities. The creativity of culture has no outcome, no conclusion. It does not result in art works, artifacts, productions. Creativity is a continuity that engenders itself in others.

1986, *Finite and Infinite Games*, 3, 9, 19, 67

Flow, or experiencing playing

What about the experience of playing? There are play faces, play moods, and play experiences. The faces can be mapped from the outside; the moods can be read by someone skilled in understanding body languages, gestures, and facial displays. It is much harder to get at the player's "experience," which is a private occurrence, varying enormously from one person to the next. Several people can participate in the same event, even behave identically, and yet have wildly different experiences.

In the early 1970s, **Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi** studied the experience of playing in a wide range of people, from chess players to surgeons, rock climbers to rock dancers. The term he gave to what people felt when their consciousness of the outside world disappeared and they merged with what they were doing is "**flow**" (**see Csikszentmihalyi box**). By now, "flow" has entered popular language: To "go with the flow" means not only to do what everyone else is doing, but to merge with whatever activity one is engaged in. Players in flow may be aware of their actions, but not of the awareness itself. What they feel is close to being in trance (see Chapter 6) and the "oceanic" experience of rituals (see Chapter 3). Flow occurs when the player becomes one with the playing. "The dance danced me." At the same time, flow can be an extreme self-awareness where the player has total control over the play act. These two aspects of flow, apparently contrasting, are essentially the same. In each case, the boundary between the interior psychological self and the performed activity dissolves.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934–): American psychologist, an expert on flow and its relation to experience and creativity. Author of *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (1975), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), *Creativity, Flow, and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996), and *Good Business: Leadership, Flow, and the Making of Meaning* (2003).

flow: the feeling of losing oneself in the action so that all awareness of anything other than performing the action disappears. A gambler "on a roll" or an athlete playing "in the zone" are experiencing flow.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Flow – the optimal state of inner experience

Flow – the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the

experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. [. . .] The flow experience is not just a peculiarity of affluent, industrialized elites. It was reported in essentially the same words by old women from Korea, by adults in Thailand and India, by teenagers in Tokyo, by Navajo shepherds, by farmers in the Italian Alps, and by workers on the assembly line in Chicago. [. . .]

The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. [. . .] "Flow" is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake. In reviewing some of the activities that consistently produce flow – such as sports, games, art, and hobbies – it becomes easier to understand what makes people happy. [. . .]

If we were to interpret the lives of animals with a human eye, we would conclude that they are in flow most of the time because their perception of what has to be done generally coincides with what they are prepared to do. [. . .] Animals' skills are always matched to concrete demands because their minds, such as they are, only contain information about what is actually present in the environment in relation to their bodily states, as determined by instinct. So a hungry lion only perceives what will help it to find a gazelle, while a sated lion concentrates fully on the warmth of the sun.

1990, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 4–6, 227–28

In the flow state, action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor. He experiences it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which he is in control of his actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future. Flow is what we have been calling "the autotelic experience."

1975, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, 35–36

Understanding flow tells us something important about the difference between whatever a particular play act or game may mean and the experience of playing. Or being fully engaged in any activity, for that matter: acting in a play, selling automobiles, experimenting in a laboratory. Whatever the meaning, the players themselves, if they are in flow, are focused on the immediate demands of the activity. Baseball may be interpreted as a perilous journey of a Ulysses-like hero, the batter hitting the ball in order to venture into dangerous enemy territory where he is safe only when standing on one of three tiny islands (the bases), and successful only when he arrives back home. Or baseball may be seen as a romantic idealization of an open, verdant space, the "ball park," sculpted out of the brick and asphalt of a crowded city. Or a demonstration of the tensions between individual prowess and team effort. Baseball may be any number of things on the meaning level. But while the game is being played, for the players, baseball is about pitching, hitting, catching, and running – and the experience of performing these actions (see figure 4.5).

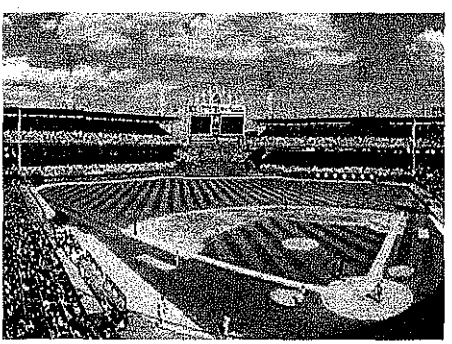


fig 4.5. American baseball's "perilous journey" – the batter tries to get to a safe base, or even hit a home run, at Shea Stadium, New York, 2001. Photograph by Henry Bial.

Transitional objects, illusions, and culture

There is another way to understand the experience of playing. Psychoanalyst **D. W. Winnicott** thought that playing was a very special experience of trust that had its origins in the "potential space" between baby and mother. This space is both an actual playground and the conceptual arena where human culture originates. Experiencing this potential space starts

when an infant first senses the difference between "me" and "not me." At birth and for some weeks after, the baby cannot make such a distinction. To the newborn, mother's breasts are "part of" the baby. As a baby suckles, the nipple is inside the baby's mouth; the breast gives warm, good-tasting, life-sustaining milk (**see figure 4.6**). Touching and sucking build a somatic–emotional bridge bonding mother and baby into a new liminal organism. This sucking and fondling precedes even intense mutual gazing. For a few days after birth, an infant's eyes don't focus, but the mouth works splendidly even before birth – as we know from photographs of fetuses sucking the thumb in utero. But even as the mother's breasts are "me" to the suckling infant, they are also "not me." The thumb is always there, but not the breast. The baby cries when hungry yet the breast is absent. The crying signifies something is missing. When the breast arrives, along with the familiar-smelling/feeling mother, the baby quiets and feeds, once more feeling complete. Babies deprived of this early experience suffer a lack that persists into adulthood.

fig 4.6. An infant nursing begins the journey from self to other – hopefully establishing with mother a safe liminal "transitional space." Photograph by Richard Schechner.

D. W. Winnicott (1896–1971): English psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist specializing in the relationship between mother and child as the basis for culture, art, and religion. Works include *The Child and the Family* (1957) and *Playing and Reality* (1971).

Mother's breasts are, in Winnicott's term, "transitional objects" – parts of the body-person that belong solely neither to the mother nor to the baby. The mutual fondling and then gazing are "transitional phenomena." Not too long after birth, the baby begins to find or invent more transitional objects – fist, fingers, thumb, a pacifier, the corner of a "security blanket." These become players in an ever-more complicated set of transitional phenomena. Soon enough there are favorite toys and other objects which the baby much values and needs. These are used to construct what Winnicott calls a "neutral space" of unchallenged illusion. Over time, as the baby begins to play in ways that adults recognize, the time spent playing increases. Almost any object, space, or span of time can be used "in play." And for the playing child within this liminal play world, anything can become something else. The first years of life are a period of protean creativity. Toy manufacturers try to convince anxious parents that this or that product is the "right toy" for their child. Indeed, when the infant becomes a toddler, she is susceptible to advertising. But in terms of biosocial process, toys are made by the imagination, not by Mattel.

Winnicott locates the origins of creativity and illusion in playing. He writes that the satisfaction of playing is a feeling that comforts and sustains a person throughout life. Winnicott asserts that the satisfying experience of playing is inherent in art and religion. Indeed, Winnicott theorizes that the transitional experience first explored between mother and baby is the foundation for the vast superstructure of culture (**see Winnicott box**). Winnicott's position is similar both to Turner's theory of liminality and the Indian philosophy of *maya–lila* (to be discussed later in the chapter).

The ethological approach to play

Winnicott expressed a psychoanalytic theory based on certain biological assumptions. This can be looked at in another way – returning to matters raised in Chapter 3 with regard to ritual. Whatever the human cultural aspects of play, there are also ethological aspects. Ethologically, play and ritual are closely related. Just as human ritual has roots in nonhuman animal behavior, so play has been observed in many species. Ethologists note three types of play: locomotor (running, jumping, tumbling, etc.), object (playing with things), and social (chasing, play-fighting, etc.). Of course, these different kinds of play are often combined. Everyone has seen a dog play with a bone or stick, monkeys chase each other or swing from branch to branch, a cat playing with a ball of yarn or a mouse – the doomed rodent an unwilling playmate in a feline version of "dark play". From an ethological perspective, playing happens when there is sufficient metabolic energy, low stress, a need for stimulation, and the intelligence to support complex sequences of somewhat improvised behavior (**see Burghardt box 1**).

D. W. Winnicott

Playing and the location of cultural experience

Of every individual who has reached to the stage of being a unit with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside, it can be said that there is an inner reality to that individual, an inner world that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war. This helps, but is it enough?

My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement, there is also a need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being [. . .] is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute.

[. . .] I am here staking a claim for an intermediate state between a baby's inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality. I am therefore studying the substance of illusion, that which is allowed to the infant, and which in adult life is inherent in art and religion, and yet becomes the hallmark of madness when an adult puts too powerful a claim on the credulity of others, forcing them to acknowledge a sharing of illusion that is not their own. We can share a respect for illusory experience, and if we wish we may collect together and form a group on the basis of the similarity of our illusory experiences. This is a natural root of grouping among human beings. [. . .]

[W]hereas inner psychic reality has a kind of location in the mind or in the belly or in the head or somewhere within the bounds of the individual personality, and whereas what is called external reality is located outside those bounds, playing and cultural experience can be given a location if one uses the concept of the potential space between the mother and the baby. [. . .]

The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the [transitional] object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifest in play. [. . .]

The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked on as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.

1971, *Playing and Reality*, 2–3, 53, 100, 103

Gordon M. Burghardt

When do animals play?

Four main factors appear to underlie play in animals [. . .] (1) there is sufficient metabolic energy (both energy stores and the capacity for sustained vigorous activity). (2) The animals are buffered from serious stress and food shortages [. . .]. (3) There is a need for stimulation to elicit species typical behavioral systems to reach an optimal level of arousal for physiological functioning (e.g., there is a susceptibility to boredom). (4) There is a life-style that involves complete sequences of behavior in varying conditions, including diverse and unpredictable environmental and/or social resources (e.g., generalist species should play more with objects than those with more rigid, specialized behavioral repertoires). Play in all species, then, including humans, will be most prevalent when there are excess resources along with appropriate evolved motivational, physiological, and ecological systems.

2005, *The Genesis of Animal Play*, 172

The more "freely" the members of a species play, the closer they are to humans, and the more recognizably "playful" their activities appear. Bees, ants, and fish are rich in ritual but poor in play. But "poor" does not mean totally absent. Recent investigations by ethologists indicate that play occurs abundantly in mammals and birds, and surprisingly often among reptiles and fish – even octopuses and some insects play (**see Burghardt box 2**). In terms of the relationship between ritual and play, ritual contributes the set patterns and repetitions, the systems, to performance; play contributes exploratory behavior, creativity, and world-making. Only a few reptiles, some birds, more mammals, and all primates play. As we might expect, the play of monkeys, gorillas, and especially chimpanzees most resembles human play. But are humans alone in displaying a verifiable "aesthetic sense" – a designed presentation of self – in playing? Some keen observers of animal behavior feel that some birds and certainly a number of mammal species show off to themselves, their playmates, and their audiences.

Gordon M. Burghardt (1941–): American ethologist and psychologist, editor of the *Journal of Comparative Psychology*, and past president of the Animal Behavior Society. His books include *Foundations of Comparative Ethology* (1985), *The Cognitive Animal* (2002, co-edited with Colin Allen and Marc Bekoff), and *The Genesis of Animal Play* (2005).

ƒ Ethologists identify five functions of playing in primates, including humans:

1 Education and/or practice for the young. Nonhuman and human primates lead very complex social lives. Young primates need to learn so much because their behavior is not genetically fixed. "Culture" – social practices specific to a given group passed on through learning – is not a human monopoly.
2 An escape from, remedy for, or alternative to stress.
3 A source of information about the environment and those who live in it.
4 A means for the young to find their place within the group's hierarchy and for adults to keep or change their places in the hierarchy.
5 Muscular exercise. /

Not all play theorists agree on these functions, or even with the functional approach. Sutton-Smith argues that functional studies are driven by a rationalist desire to prove that "play works." However, I find the functional explanations useful.

Gordon M. Burghardt

Even the octopuses do it

The study of octopus object play by experienced students of cephalopod behavior is so far the most convincing evidence we have for play in invertebrates. If these findings are valid, then the roots of the biological ability to evolve and perform playful acts go back over a billion years! [. . .] The comparative evidence shows that play is not limited to some or even all placental mammals, but is found in a wide range of animals, including marsupials, birds, turtles, lizards, fish, and invertebrates. [. . .] The field of molecular genetics has begun to pay attention to the interaction of specific genes with the development and life history processes in the expression of many traits of animals. Underlying the grand biological diversity in the world is a surprisingly conservative genetic toolkit. Traits that were thought to have arisen completely independently in animals separated by hundreds of millions of years, such as eyes in flies and mice, are controlled by similar genes [. . .]. Thus although play arose many times in evolution, it may have been the result of common evolutionary contexts that activated a suite of retained homeotic hox genes which, although they may have other functions, could be repeatedly co-opted in the service of playlike traits.

2005, *The Genesis of Animal Play*, 379, 382, 384–85

It is also interesting to note that playing in primates – although said to be the locus of "creativity" – is unoriginal at the level of behavior. To extrapolate from the work of several ethologists, it seems that playing "borrows" behaviors from contexts where their purpose is clear – such as fighting or mating – redeploys them, makes a show of them, and uses them for no apparent purpose (**see Loizos box**). In fact, this lack of purpose is a key indicator that playing is going on. Thus a sequence of play includes rearrangements of "not-play" actions that are fragmented, reordered, exaggerated, and repeated. The creativity of play comes in the new ways already-known behaviors are reorganized, made into new sequences. Some individual movements within a play sequence may never be completed, and this incomplete element may be repeated over and over. Seen this way, play is a very cogent example of "restored behavior."

Caroline Loizos

Primate playing including people

One of [play's] immediately noticeable characteristics is that it is behavior that borrows or adopts patterns that appear in other contexts where they achieve immediate and obvious ends. When these patterns appear in play they seem to be divorced from their original motivation and are qualitatively distinct from the same patterns appearing in their originally motivated contexts. [. . .] The fundamental similarity [. . .] between human and animal play [. . .] lies in the exaggerated and uneconomical quality of the motor patterns involved. Regardless of its motivation or its end-product, this is what all playful activity has in common; and it is possible that it is all that it has in common, since causation and function could vary from species to species.

1969, "Play Behavior in Higher Primates: A Review," 228–29

In animals, a play sequence may be broken off by the introduction of different activities such as eating and then resumed later with full intensity as if the break in the action had not occurred. This "time out" quality, as in human sports or games, is extremely important. It demonstrates how play acquires an independence, how it forms its own make-believe world. Although playing is made up of behavior taken from highly functional activities, it becomes an end in itself without direct functional consequences. The pleasure in playing is autotelic, coming not from what it "earns" but from enjoying the actions in themselves. Furthermore, playing is a way to perform safely and without consequences actions that in other contexts would determine hierarchy, mating rights, or even life itself. Playing is "playing around." As noted, the behavior building blocks of play are structurally very close to those of ritual. Does this make play a sub-category of ritual? Or is it the other way round?

The message, "This is play"

How does a person signal, "I am playing"? It is easy enough when play takes the form of games performed according to accepted rules. But despite the enormous popularity of rule-bound games, much playing is not formal. And even formal games are often played informally, as in "sandlot baseball," where players twist the rules to meet contingencies. More pervasive still are bursts of microplay that can erupt anywhere, anytime, even in the midst of work (**see Handelman box 2**). So how do people know when someone is "just playing" or that now is the time to "pull a fast one"? Although it's not possible to answer this question definitively, humans probably signal, "This is play" by overplaying or underplaying, or by culturally specific signals like a smirk or the winking of an eye (**see figure 4.7**).

fig 4.7. A wink is more than a blink – it's a signal, a meta-communication. Photograph of Sophia Martin Schechner by Richard Schechner.

Gregory Bateson theorized that an animal wanting to play "metacommunicates" that intention – says, in effect, "I am playing" or "I want to play." A **metacommunication** is a signal that frames other signals contained within or after it. Let me explain using "Bateson's dog" as my example. You are playing with Bateson's dog, who shows his teeth, snarls, and nips you – even exaggerating the action of nipping you by not letting go and growling. But you are not afraid. That is because Bateson's dog has metacommunicated that he is only playing. The dog is saying, "I could really bite you, but I am not biting you. My nipping tells you the opposite of what a bite would tell you. A bite would tell you, 'I hate you; I am angry with you.' But my nip tells you, 'I love you; I am at ease with you.'" The dog metacommunicates the message, "What I am doing now is playing with you. My playing refers to my 'not playing'; my 'not hurting' you refers to the fact that I could hurt you, but choose not to. My choosing not to is proof that I am playing." Within the play frame or during playtime, everything, even what would be negative or harmful, is positive and good (**see Bateson box**).

metacommunication: a signal that tells receivers how to interpret the communication they are receiving. For example, winking an eye or holding up crossed fingers while speaking indicates to the listener that the speaker's words are not to be taken seriously.

Don Handelman

Banana time

So a serious discussion about the high cost of living could be suddenly transformed into horseplay or into a prank; or a worker might utter a string of "oral autisms." The expression of themes was thus temporary, somewhat idiosyncratic excursions into the reality of play; and each protagonist experimented in his own way, and to some extent at his own pace, with these transitions from the reality of work to that of expressive behavior.

1976, "Rethinking 'Banana Time,'" 442

Extend this to the performing arts. It is easy enough to see how comedy and farce, circus and stand-up comedians, music and dance are playful. But why is tragedy playful? Why are violent videogames playful? Because these arts and entertainments refer to that which, if real, would be painful. We can empathize with that pain, or pull the trigger of that videogame gun without "really doing" what we would be doing if we were not playing. This is consonant with the Stanislavskian "as if." It is also consistent with my own theory of performing as the enactment of a double negative, the "not . . . not."

The question remains: given the functions of play, does viewing tragedies or playing violent videogames dull people to pain, or train them to administer it? There is a contradiction between ethological theory, which indicates play is practice and training, and Batesonian theory, which asserts play is a way around violence, a way to express aggression without doing harm. To the contrary, the Batesonian argument goes, such playing does good by clearly outlining the play frame and keeping the performance inside it. Bateson's dog "promises" not to really bite. At present, there is no resolution to this contradiction. Those who see harm in violent entertainments argue that teenagers especially are unable to keep the play frame intact, that they "actually" kill while intending to "just play." The arguments on both sides are ideologically loaded.

Gregory Bateson

Playful nips and bites

[T]he statement "This is play" looks something like this: "These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote." [. . .] Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional. Not only do the playing animals not quite mean what they are saying but, also, they are usually communicating about something which does not exist. At the human level, this leads to a vast variety of complications and inversions in the fields of play, fantasy, and art. [. . .]

Finally, in the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the "metaphor that is meant," the flag which men will die to save, and the sacrament that is felt to be more than "an outward and visible sign, given to us." [. . .] We face then two peculiarities of play: (a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent. These two peculiarities sometimes combine strangely to reverse a conclusion reached above. It was stated that the playful nip denotes the bite, but does not denote that which would be denoted by the bite. But there are other instances where an opposite phenomenon occurs. A man experiences the full intensity of subjective terror when a spear is flung out at him out of the 3D screen or when he falls headlong from some peak created in his own mind in the intensity of nightmare. At the moment of terror there was no questioning of "reality," but still there was no spear in the movie house and no cliff in the bedroom.

1972, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 180, 182–83

Bateson's *Othello*

In Act 5, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the Moor murders Desdemona, his wife. Three actions occur simultaneously:

- Othello murders Desdemona.
- Two actors play a scene.
- Spectators experience a theatre piece.

On the first level, there is no playing. In a jealous rage, Othello commits murder. Othello does not send any message to Desdemona that he is just playing. Nor does Desdemona play at terror while pleading for her life (**see figure 4.8**).

Playing enters the scene on the second level. To play effectively, the actors have to communicate to each other that everything they do onstage is part of the play in both senses of the word: they are enacting Shakespeare's drama; they are playing with each other and not really murdering. How do they do this? They rehearse. They work out all the details. By the time of the public performance, they follow a score of restored behavior that both actors know and have practiced together. This reinforces the play frame, signaling during every performance, both to themselves and to the spectators, "We are just playing."

To use Bateson's words,

> These actions in which we now engage [acting in a theatre] do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote [murdering an innocent but presumed adulterous wife]. Not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional [the murder is a stage action].

It is the fiction, the skill of the acting and writing – not what the fiction stands for, the murdering of an innocent wife – that wins the audience's applause. Othello, Desdemona, Iago, and the rest of the characters may be condemned, admired, or pitied; what happens to them may move an audience to tears. But it is the actors who take the bows, the playwright who is celebrated.

On the third level, what spectators experience – the nip – is Shakespeare's *Othello*, and the bite is how the play resonates in each spectator's life. This is both an individual and a collective experience. Audiences share subtle but unmistakable cues. A rapt audience creates a special kind of focused silence. Levels two and three interact. The audience receives Shakespeare's play by means of its performance. If the acting is bad, the spectators stop paying attention; there is coughing and whispering, maybe even booing. But no matter how involved or displeased, no one jumps onto the stage to stop the murder. Sometimes a play is stopped because the spectators are outraged by what they are seeing. At other times, people walk out. In these cases, the performance is rejected at levels two or three, never at level one. Some people may object to a performance at level one, believing that certain subjects or actions are not suitable for artistic representation. Two very different examples of the "unrepresentable" would be the Shoah and snuff pornography.

fig 4.8. Othello, played by Willard White, murdering Desdemona, played by Imogen Stubbs, 1989. Copyright Shakespeare Centre Library.

But despite objections, probably just about everything doable or imaginable has been shown as art or as entertainment, that is, "in play."

At level three, if the actors were to depart from the score in a big way – if Othello pushed down smotheringly hard on the pillow, if Desdemona poked a finger in Othello's eye – the scene would be destroyed as play. Even less extreme, if one of the actors felt the other was no longer playing, or not playing according to the agreed-on score, the stage show would be disrupted. Many arguments erupt backstage over just that kind of thing. "You lost it; you were totally out of control!" But no matter how "out of control," no actors playing a death scene ever lost it to such a degree that they stopped playing and performed "for real." The same cannot be said for police enacting the life role of "cop."

What about audience participation, public meetings, Boal's Forum Theatre, or other performances whose metacommunication is that the playing includes or even demands a blurring of the boundaries separating audience and

performers, stage and house? By naming participants "spect-actors," Boal signals that the Theatre of the Oppressed is most effective when the boundary between spectators and actors is blurred or entirely effaced. Boal's message to spectators is, "This is play, and you must play with us!" During the 1960s and 1970s, signals and rules governing audience participation were often vague or deliberately ambivalent, creating both exciting theatre and confusion onstage and off.

Playing blood rites

There are "for real" performances that are difficult to categorize as either play or ritual. Trance performing presents an intriguing example. While in trance, performers are "being played with" rather than playing. While in trance, a person is possessed by a being or force that takes them over. However, even in trance, performers are not out of control. They perform within defined conventions. In the Balinese Rangda-Barong trance drama, the dancers turn their *krisses* (8-inch-long daggers) against their own breasts, pressing the krisses with such force that the knife blades bend. But the trance dancers rarely draw blood (**see figure 4.9**). The Balinese say, "If a person hurts himself, the trance is not real." I will discuss trance performances in more detail in Chapter 6.

In some performances, drawing blood is essential. From gladiatorial contests to bullfighting and boxing, the show of blood is inextricably part of the game. Many rituals depend on blood. The Passion of Christ is a blood sacrifice erected on the typical Roman capital punishment of crucifixion, while the Communion is a sharing of flesh and blood. Among the Aztecs, tearing out the still-beating heart was at the center of their ritual performances. In Europe, from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, executions were elaborate, carnivalesque ritual shows. Many executions featured well-prepared final speeches by the condemned, sometimes including confessions, followed by long hours of painful and humiliating suffering – all eagerly enjoyed by multitudes of spectators (**see Chute box and Merback box**).

Public executions continue today in various parts of the world. Executions in the USA must be witnessed by designated official viewers – transforming the State's ultimate punishment into a performance. But far from all executions are so neatly regulated. From 1882 to 1968, 4,742 Americans – the overwhelming preponderance of them African-Americans – were lynched. Too often, lynchings were festive occasions attended by hundreds of people, many with cameras. People turned these souvenir snapshots into postcards and mailed them. *Without Sanctuary* (2000) was

fig 4.9. A Balinese dancer in trance turns his *kris* (ceremonial knife) against his own body – but he does not hurt himself. Photograph courtesy of Eugenio Barba.

first an exhibit and then a book containing some of these postcards (http://withoutsanctuary.org/). When the Americans invaded Iraq in 2003, journalists "embedded" within combat units made video broadcasts that looked and sounded like action movies. After the fall of Baghdad, the Iraqi insurgency struck back with suicide bombings, kidnappings, and executions – distributing videotapes of beheadings designed not only to warn and terrify but also to gloat.

Marchette Chute

Performing public executions in Elizabethan London

Another source of public entertainments was executions, and the criminals knew what was expected of them by the

public. They went to their death like actors, delivering final speeches from the scaffolds, and a hanging at Wapping was made especially impressive because the chief performer wore breeches of crimson taffeta. When there was an important mass execution, like that which followed the Babington Conspiracy in 1586, the government made the scaffold high and railed off the place to keep horsemen away so "the people might plainly see the execution." The idea of the government was to imprint on the popular mind the horrors of treason and the ghastly death to which it led, but the Londoners treated the occasion like an especially interesting day at the theatre. "There was no lane, street, alley or house in London [. . .] out of which there issued not some of each age and sex, insomuch that the ways were pestered with people so multiplied, as they thronged and overran one another for haste, contending to the place of death for the advantage of the ground where to stand, see and hear."

1949, *Shakespeare of London*, 67–68

Mitchell Merback

The spectacle of executions in medieval Europe

Before the execution ever took place, spectators were presented with an array of symbols communicating vital information about the criminal and his or her deeds.

[. . .] In Germany the formal handing over of the convict to the executioner was treated as a spectacle: while repeating the sentence of death, the officiating judge or town clerk would hold up a wand of office, colored white, red or black (depending on local tradition), break it with great aplomb, cast the bits down on the convict's feet and announce the condemned's now broken bond with humanity. [. . .] After sentencing a bell might toll, and then continue until the moment of death. Clothing conveyed the convict's status at a glance: nobles might wear their livery, while infamous characters were often stripped to the waist. [. . .]

What did spectators come to see? It has often been said that for ordinary people executions, though intended to be terrifying, actually offered an experience that was emotionally comforting: the reassurance that comes with seeing a bona fide sinner confess his crimes, show contrition, receive absolution, endure a painful ordeal and find redemption on the other side. If such an unfortunate wretch can be thus saved, the reasoning goes, so can a sinner like me. [. . .] Except in cases where heinous criminals, outsiders and infamous characters of various stripes became the object of intense collective hatred, the community insisted that the spectacle be edifying, not as a lesson in the majesty of the law but as a drama of Christian repentance, purification, and salvation.

1999, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel*, 138, 144

Philosophies of play

The early view of play allied it with power. Those with the most power – the gods, mythic heroes, kings – acted with absolute freedom, creating their own rules as they went along, indulging their unconstrained desires. These beings played on a big scale. Their playing was world-making, either cosmically or socially. A basic theme of ancient Greek tragedy is the struggle between the unconstrained power of "free play" and the "rule of law," or behavior governed by rules that every being had to obey. To whom did such unconstrained power belong – to the gods, royals, heroes, nature? There was as yet no dominion of human law – a system of constraints more powerful than any individual yet not divine. This dialectical tension between power and law is strong throughout Western philosophy and history, up to the present.

About a century after the high point of ancient Greek tragic theatre, the reigning philosophers of the Western tradition, Plato and Aristotle, established rationality as the dominant system of thought. Plato wanted a city, and Aristotle a science, governed by known, universal, and generally accepted rules or laws. These laws had to be obeyed by people, gods, and nature itself. Free play was replaced by rule-governed games. Free play, *paidia*, was subsumed under, or governed by, rule-bound behavior, *ludus* (see **Caillois box 2**). Caillois uses the Greek word *paidia* (related to the word for "child") to mean a spontaneous burst of play, turbulent and unconstrained. On the other hand, the Latin

ludus means a game governed by rules. This useful distinction between paidia and ludus is overlooked by many theorists, who depend solely on variations of ludus – ludic, illusion, delusion, ludicrous, etc.

Roger Caillois

Paidia and ludus

[Play] can be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions [. . .]. I call this second component ludus.

1979 [1958], *Man, Play, and Games*, 13

Mihai I. Spariosu

Nietzsche and prerational play

Nietzsche's philosophical project can be seen as a return to Hellenic prerational values, and his critique of modern culture as being carried out from the point of view of these values. [. . .] If Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return can be traced back to Heraclitus, that of the Will to Power can be traced back to the archaic principle of might makes right, and that of the Übermensch to the epic and tragic hero. Furthermore, Nietzsche's oracular, gnomic, and dithyrambic style bears a strong family resemblance to that of lyric and tragic poetry, suggesting a reversion to a prerational mentality. Consequently, to a predominantly rational mode of thinking Nietzsche will appear as a paradoxical, ambiguous, multidimensional thinker. But viewed from the prerational perspective, his philosophical project loses its paradoxical and ambiguous quality, offering instead a far-ranging critique of modern rational values.

1989, *Dionysus Reborn*, 69

But just because Plato threw the poets out of his Republic did not mean that paidia was forever banished. In the nineteenth century, themes from pre-Socratic Greek philosophy were taken up by **Friedrich Nietzsche** (see **Spariosu box 2**) and further developed in the twentieth century as a scientific theory by Werner Heisenberg in the "uncertainty principle" and as a cultural theory by Jacques Derrida in "deconstruction." "Free play" in many guises – from Dada to performance art, from the unconscious to indeterminacy – has regained much of its power, if not its divine status. But the question is far from settled. It probably never can be settled because the struggle is not over data or interpretation, but over basic worldviews.

The rationalists hold that the cosmos is an objective entity, existing outside of, and without dependence on, human consciousness. This cosmos, often called "nature," is governed by its own orderly systems that may not yet, or ever, be wholly understood by humans but which exist, as it were, "in the mind of God," or as "natural laws." As part of nature, humans are also governed by natural law. The job of science is to discover the laws of nature, to confirm them through experiment and observation, and to systematize them into axioms and theories in human form, principally as mathematics. Two examples of this "scientific method" are **Isaac Newton**'s "three laws motion" (of inertia, of action and reaction, and of acceleration proportional to force) and **Albert Einstein**'s famous equation, $e = mc^2$ (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): German philosopher whose ideas and writings continue to influence philosophical, political, and aesthetic theory. Among his many writings are *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–85), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

Isaac Newton (1642–1727): English mathematician and scientist, author of the *Principia* (1687) and inventor of calculus (independently devised by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1646–1716). Newton's "laws" of gravity and thermodynamics went unchallenged until the advent of quantum mechanics in the twentieth century.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955): German-born physicist who emigrated to the USA in 1933 after Hitler came to power. Winner, in 1921, of the Nobel Prize in Physics. Einstein is best known for his special and general theories of relativity.

The opposing view holds that the cosmos is a multiverse consisting of dynamic, emergent, multiple, uncentered processes that are always changing, existing as relational systems that can be known only probabilistically; and that these probabilities are the results of an ongoing and unfinishable negotiation between human consciousness-imagination and whatever is "out there" (if anything). There may even be billions of universes existing simultaneously (**see Waldrop box**).

If the world is a game – a metaphor not only of Western thought, but widespread in many cultures – do its rules exist outside or only within specific playfields and playtimes? Are there universal characteristics of play, as **Johan Huizinga** claims, or is play culture-specific (**see Huizinga box 2**)? Does playing the game change the rules, as Heisenberg asserts? Are the consistency and universality which rationality seeks only temporary and local? This make-up-the-rules-as-you-go-along is what Nietzsche called the "will-to-power." Nietzsche believed artists and children played in this way (**see Nietzsche box**). The creation of "illusory" worlds may in fact be humankind's main preoccupation (**see Sutton-Smith box 2**).

Johan Huizinga (1872–1945): Dutch historian and play theorist. Author of one of the most enduringly influential treatises on play, *Homo Ludens* (1938; Eng. 1944).

M. Mitchell Waldrop

Multiple universes

An analysis of localized inflation ["black holes"] suggests that empty space may be spawning universes by the billions, without us ever knowing; was our own universe created this way? What would happen if we could somehow reproduce the conditions of the Big Bang in the modern universe? More precisely, what would happen if a sample of matter were somehow compressed into a tiny region of ultrahigh density and temperature – say 10^{24}K? In one solution, for example, the outside universe simply crushes the hot region into a standard black hole. However, there is a much more interesting solution in which the hot region does indeed inflate – but in a totally different direction that is perpendicular to ordinary space and time. It becomes a kind of aneurysm bulging outward from the side of our familiar universe. In fact, it quickly pinches off and becomes a separate universe of its own. [. . .]

This newborn cosmos [could then] expand to a scale of billions of light-years, producing galaxies, stars, planets, and even life.

1987, "Do-It-Yourself Universes," 845–46

Johan Huizinga

The formal characteristics of play

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. The function of play [. . .] can largely be derived from two basic aspects under which we meet it: as a contest for something or a representation of something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something.

1970 [1938], *Homo Ludens*, 13

Friedrich Nietzsche

God's play, child's play, artists' play

In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence. And as children and artists play, so plays the ever-living fire. It constructs and destroys, all in innocence. Such is the game that the aeon plays with itself. Transforming itself into water and earth, it builds towers of sand like a child at the seashore, piles them up and tramples them down. From time to time it starts the game anew. An instant of satiety – and again it is seized by its need, as the artist is seized by his need to create. Not hybris but the ever self-renewing impulse to play calls new worlds into being. The child throws its toys away from time to time – and starts again in innocent caprice. But when it does build, it combines and joins and forms its structures regularly, conforming to inner laws. Only aesthetic man can look thus at the world [. . .].

1962 [c. 1870], *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 62

Brian Sutton-Smith

Play and human achievement

Given that there is nothing more characteristic of human achievement than the creation of illusory cultural and theoretical worlds, as in music, dance, literature, and science, then children's and gamblers' full participation in such play worlds can be seen not as a defect, or as compensation for inadequacy, but rather as participation in a major central preoccupation of humankind. The modern computer-age habit of calling these "virtual worlds" rather than illusory worlds highlights this move toward a more positive, if narrower, epistemological attitude about their function.

1997, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 54

Heisenberg discovered that the act of observing very small particles (quanta of matter-energy) changes what is being observed. Although the mathematics is beyond me, the underlying theory and its implications can be simply stated. In the world of subatomic phenomena, ordinary commonsense causality does not function. Instead, one can only state the "probability" that a group of subatomic particles/waves will act in a certain way, be in a certain position, at a certain time (see **Heisenberg box and Northrup box**).

Werner Heisenberg

Particles, waves, and uncertainty

The electron may have been practically at rest before the observation. But in the act of observation at least one light quantum of the X-ray must have passed the microscope and must first have been deflected by the electron. Therefore, the electron has been pushed by the light quantum, it has changed its momentum and its velocity, and one can show that the uncertainty of this change is just big enough to guarantee the validity of the uncertainty relations. [. . .]

Actually, we need not speak of particles at all. For many experiments it is more convenient to speak of matter waves [. . . which is] much nearer to the truth than the particle picture. [. . .] The two pictures are of course mutually exclusive, because a certain thing cannot at the same time be a particle (i.e., substance confined to a very small volume) and a wave (i.e., a field spread out over a large space), but the two complement each other. By playing with both pictures, by going from the one picture to the other and back again, we finally get the right impression of the strange kind of reality behind our atomic experiments. [. . .] The knowledge of the position of a particle is complementary to the knowledge of its velocity or momentum. If we know the one with high accuracy we cannot know the other with high accuracy; still we must know both for determining the behavior of the system. [. . .] A real difficulty in understanding this interpretation arises, however, when one asks the famous question: But what happens "really" in an atomic event? [. . . W]hat one deduces from an observation is a probability function, a mathematical expression that combines statements about possibilities or tendencies with statements about our knowledge of facts. So we cannot completely objectify the results of an observation, we cannot describe what "happens" between this observation and the next.

1958, *Physics and Philosophy*, 47–50

F. S. C. Northrup

The uncertainty principle

In quantum mechanics [. . .] the very act of observing alters the object being observed when its quantum numbers are small. [. . .] The introduction of the concept of probability into the definition of state of the object of scientific knowledge in quantum mechanics rules out [. . .] *in principle* and not merely in practice due to the imperfections of human observation and instruments, the satisfying of the condition that the object of the physicist's knowledge is an isolated system. Heisenberg shows also that the including of the experimental apparatus and even of the eye of the observing scientist in the physical system which is the object of the knower's knowledge does not help, since, if quantum mechanics be correct, the states of all objects have to be defined in principle by recourse to the concept of probability.

1958, "Introduction" to Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 24

It might seem that such a theory is of small consequence to everyday life, and indeed commonsense causality is not affected by the uncertainty principle. If I throw a stone at a window and the glass breaks, I can determine the instant when the stone shattered the pane of the glass. But from a philosophical point of view, quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle were revolutionary. Heisenberg overturned classical Newtonian physics. If at a fundamental level, "nature" cannot be fixed outside of probability, then there is no physical solidity, no fundamental material substance. The "what is" of the universe is not founded on certainty but on a kind of gaming, a throw of the subatomic dice. It was this that so infuriated Einstein. He insisted that God does not play dice (**see Einstein box**).

Albert Einstein

God does not play dice

You believe in the God who plays dice, and I in complete law and order in a world which exists, and which I, in a wildly speculative way, am trying to capture. [. . .] Even the great initial success of the quantum theory does not make me believe in the fundamental dice-game [. . .].

1971, *The Born–Einstein Letters*, 180–81

Einstein (and God) aside, the uncertainty principle underlies much of contemporary thinking. When translated into philosophy, it appears as Derridean deconstruction, perhaps the most playful – if also very difficult to understand – speculation (**see Wilson box**). According to Derrida, there is no center because the center is not a fixed place but

a function (**see Derrida box**). All authority is subverted, "displaced," opening spaces for all kinds of radical free play. Derrida's writing not only inaugurates a discourse on decentering, but enacts it with plentiful wordplay, punning, and double meanings. Derrida's thought ramifies beyond philosophy into politics and aesthetics, as well as into cultural, literary, and performance theory. I will discuss deconstruction more fully in Chapter 5.

R. Rawdon Wilson

Play and deconstruction

[T]hough it may not be possible adequately to define the concept, Derrida seems to make it clear that free play is limitless, unlimited by any irreducible signified or transcendental concept that cannot be further decomposed, and it manifests itself in the process of indefinite substitution. Play, considered as free play, lies beyond stable, centered structures, makes them untenable, decenters them, and deprivileges them.

1990, *In Palamedes' Shadow*, 16

Jacques Derrida

Where there is no center, all is playing

It was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.

1978, *Writing and Difference*, 280

Artists may not follow Heisenberg literally, but they understand him metaphorically. Arts, once the home of strict choreography, precise scores, and fixed mise-en-scènes have for some time been open to chance processes, unpredictable eruptions from the unconscious, and improvisation. Of course, there are multiple causes that brought these operations into play during the past century. Improvisation, for example, is fundamental to African performing arts and rituals (**see Drewal box**). From the seventeenth century, African cultures became better known in Europe and the Americas as a consequence of slavery and colonialism. But however Africa arrived, its impact has been enormous. In the arts, painters such as **Pablo Picasso** took the basics of cubism from African art, and African music from ragtime and jazz to rock and roll and hip-hop reshaped first Western and then world pop music. Freud's investigations into "dream work," the unconscious, and creativity also had an enormous impact on the arts. Seen this way, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle was part of a larger movement in Western thought broadening the basis of creativity and expression. A theory that changed physics was adapted to the arts. Among many examples of performances based on uncertainty are the chance musical compositions and lectures of John Cage, the Fluxus group of New York, Happenings, and the "manifestations" of Dada artists (**see figure 4.10**). The outflow from this kind of thinking continues to affect performance art, music, theatre, dance, and the visual arts in the twenty-first century.

Margaret Thompson Drewal

Improvisation, play, and ritual

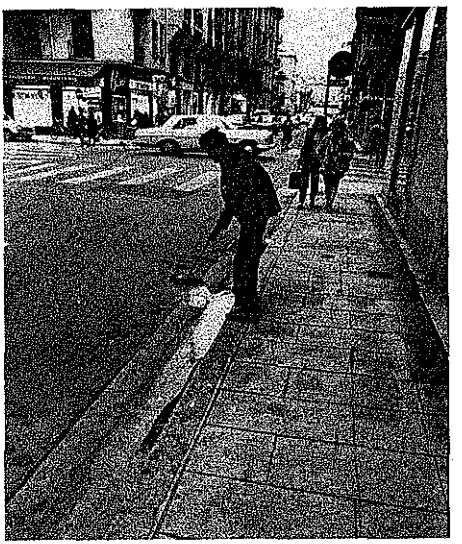
Whenever improvisation is a performative strategy in ritual, it places ritual squarely within the domain of play. It is indeed the playing, the improvising, that engages people, drawing them into the action, constructing their relationships, thereby generating multiple and simultaneous discourses always surging between harmony/disharmony, order/disorder, integration/opposition, and so on.

1992, *Yoruba Ritual*, 7–8

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973): Spanish visual artist, inventor of the cubist style of painting, as illustrated by *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Picasso's long artistic career spanned eight decades and featured innovations in a number of styles and media.

fig 4.10. Chance or indeterminate performances can take many forms, ranging from electronic music presented in a concert hall to a barely noticed "action" blending in to everyday life.

John Cage looking over the shoulder of David Tudor as they prepare a concert of "chance" music. Royal Festival Hall, 1972. Copyright Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis.



Fluxus artist Ben Vautier sweeping a street in Nice, France, 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Richard Schechner.

The bias against play

The other side of the coin is the deep-seated Western bias against play. From Plato to the Puritans, the playful has been considered frivolous, unimportant, and even sinful. Playing is a major distraction tempting people away from work, which is the "real business" of living. Plato wanted to banish the players, especially poets, playwrights, and actors, from his ideal Republic. Shockingly, he almost succeeded. Adults are supposed to play only during "time off" (from work) in specially designated places and according to well-defined rules. If the playing is regarded as risky, sexual, and subversive to work values or the authority of the state, whole neighborhoods are fenced off and designated a "red-light" district. The color red symbolizes both something hot and "stop." Or special days are designated for playing – holidays, time off, and vacation. But every Mardi Gras is followed by Ash Wednesday, each binge by a confession. It is no accident that red-light districts are full of con artists, prostitutes, cross-dressers (who are fantasy role-players), actors, and musicians. In many cities, the railroad station, the theatre district, and the red-light district are cheek by jowl. People want to come and go efficiently from where they can play or watch others play.

In fact, the theatre has only relatively recently, and still perilously, been accorded middle-class status in the West. In Germany, the *Stadt-Theater* (municipal theatre) tradition started by the aristocracy was soon adopted by the increasingly wealthy and culture-hungry middle class. The German model was widely imitated throughout Europe and in the USA, where it was dubbed the "regional theatre" movement.

fig 4.11. Times Square, New York – then and now, except that "then" is removed in space rather than time.

The "new" 42nd Street, featuring Disney's *The Lion King*, directed by Julie Taymor. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

The way 42nd Street used to look before "development." This picture was taken in 2001 a few blocks away on 8th Avenue on a block not yet developed. As of 2005, the block looks the same. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

But America's largest and most famous theatre district is New York's Broadway, located near Times Square. Commencing in the early 1990s, Times Square and West 42nd Street were transformed from an "adults-only" district into a "family-oriented" neighborhood dominated by Disney, MGM, the Ford Motor Company, and other mega-corporations. But only a few blocks north of the "new Times Square," remnants of the "old Times Square" remain in place (**see figure 4.11**).

The performing arts have traditionally been ambivalent with regard to "morality," with one foot in church, the other barely out of bed: from sacred music to whorehouse jazz, from magisterial displays of royalty to the strutting of Restoration epoch actresses and their rakes, from the long-legged grace of the prima ballerina to the sexually available girls of the corps de ballet displayed backstage to the men of means who could afford to purchase access to them (**see figure 4.12**).

Other cultures have not been so ambivalent. In India, music, dance, sex, and religion were long associated with each other (until British Victorian values imposed by colonialism took hold). *Devadasis*, well-trained temple dancers whose name means "servants of god," performed in front of the *murtis* or icons of the gods. Devadasis were available on a regulated basis for sex with priests, princes, and important patrons of the temples – who were also patrons of the arts. The children of such unions were brought up to be dancers and musicians. In most of India, the devadasis were outlawed in the 1930s after a fierce campaign against them led by both Indian reformers and the British. A few devadasis continued to dance into the 1970s. Several classical Indian dance forms – *bharatanatyam* and *odissi* among them – originated in devadasi dancing (**see figure 4.13**).

Maya–lila

India may be more receptive to a playful mix of categories because playing is a fundamental ingredient of Indian philosophy, worldview, and aesthetics. The idea that the universe may be a cosmic dice game, that meaning is a "play of signification," that the "will to power" and the uncertainty principle operate at all levels of natural, animal, and human life and experience has been a persistent theme in India for about 2,500–3,000 years. *Maya* and *lila* are Sanskrit words meaning "illusion" and "play." The concepts embedded in these two words are hard to pin down because – as with the Greek *mimesis*, *praxis*, and *katharsis* – key terms in Aristotle's theory of tragedy – there is an enormous library of commentary, contradictory interpretations, and changing emphasis over historical time. The earliest meaning of maya was "real," derived from its root "ma" – "to make" (**see O'Flaherty box**). But it was not long before maya became identified with the creative force as such, both divine and artistic; and with powers of transformation – the making of something out of something else, or out of nothing.

maya–lila: an Indian philosophical concept of existence as play where boundaries separating "real" and "illusion," "true" and "false," are continuously shifting and are wholly permeable. The notion that life is a game, a dream, a sport, a drama.

fig 4.12. Edgar Degas' *Rehearsal of the Ballet*, 1876, depicts an old man supervising the young dancers while another man gazes. The painting romanticizes the access to women performers that men of privilege and money enjoyed. Photograph by E. G. Schemp. Copyright The Nelson-Atkinson Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. (Purchase: The Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation Acquisition Fund, F-73-30).

But in India, as elsewhere, artists were suspect, slippery characters. And the gods were much like artists – sometimes to be admired, sometimes to be distrusted and feared. Therefore, maya soon began to expand its meanings to include "illusion," "not real," "false," "unsubstantial," "deceitful." It has kept these multiple meanings. "All life is maya," an Indian will say, meaning that nothing is reliable, everything is just show. But he may also mean that living is extremely unpredictable, unreliable, subject to sudden shifts, fundamentally playful, but not necessarily fun. And he may imply that all experienced reality is constructed. The ultimate absolute – the brahman beyond all knowing – is without shape or form, unmanifest, uncreated: the categorical opposite of maya.

Lila is a more ordinary word meaning "play," "sport," or "drama." In Indian terms, the gods in their lila made a world of maya: when the gods play, the world comes into existence; but this world, however substantial it appears, is not fixed or reliable. It is ultimately governed by desire and chance. But desire and chance as the gods play it. From the human standpoint, the gods' lilas range from the capricious to the awesome. Annually, in north India a cycle play recounting the life of Vishnu's seventh avatar (incarnation) Rama is called Ramlila – the lila or play of Rama. At Ramnagar, across the sacred Ganga river from the holy city of Banaras (also called Varanasi and Kashi), the Ramlila takes 31 days to enact and draws ardently reverential crowds of up to 75,000 persons (**see figure 4.14**). At the core of the Ramlila experience is

fig 4.13. Indian dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi (1944–97) in a classic stance of odissi, 1990s. Photograph courtesy of Eugenio Barba.

something into existence [. . .] but manipulating the existent forces of nature or invoking the power to create and achieve the marvelous. Thus *maya* first meant making something that was not there before; then it came to mean making something that was there into something that was not really there. The first describes the universe in the Vedic world-view; the second, the universe in the Vedantic world-view. [. . .] In both cases *maya* can often best be translated as "transformation." [. . .] A similar cluster of meanings radiates from it [*maya*] as from the English derivatives of the Latin word for play (*ludo*) – de-lusion, il-lusion, e-lusive, and so forth – and from the word "play" itself – play as drama, as swordplay or loveplay, as the play of light that causes mirages, as the double image implicit in word-play. [. . .] These word clusters delineate a universe full of beauty and motion that enchants us all. All Indian philosophies acknowledge that *maya* is a fact of life – the fact of life; but some (the *moksha*-oriented [those who seek liberation from the wheel of birth–death–rebirth] regard it as a negative fact, to be combated, while others (*samsara*-oriented [those who enjoy this world as it is] regard it as a positive fact, to be embraced.

1984, *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities*, 117–19

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty

Maya and the real illusion

[*Maya* originally] meant only what was real; through its basis in the verbal root *ma* ("to make") it expressed the sense of "realizing the phenomenal world" [. . .] In the *Rig Veda*, to "measure out" the universe was to create it, to divide it into its constituent parts, to *find* it by bringing it out of chaos. [. . .] Magicians do this; artists do it; gods do it. But according to certain Indian philosophies, every one of us does it every minute of our lives.

This concept of *maya* as a kind of artistic power led gradually to its later connotation of magic, illusion, and deceit. [. . .] It often means not merely bringing

the belief that when they appear in their full costumes and enact the story of Rama, five pre-adolescent boys are actually the gods Rama, his wife Sita, and Rama's three brothers (**see figure 4.15**). The presence of the divine is a lila that at moments dissolves maya, revealing an absolute reality, who is Sita-Rama. The gods-as-boys/boys-as-gods is the lila of Vishnu and Lakshmi who take on the human form of Rama and Sita. The 31-day play is the specific human lila (theatre) in which the divine lila takes place. The lesser incorporates the greater; the absolute appears in the heart of illusion. If this is dizzying, that is because the relationship of maya to lila is paradoxical.

Ramlila is not the only lila of India. The deities often manifest themselves both in regularly scheduled performances and in unpredictable ways. The Khumbmela – a festival that takes place every twelve years – attracts millions of people. The Khumbmela at Allahabad in 2001 brought up to 60 million to the *triveni* – the spot where the Ganga and Jamuna rivers – both sacred – are joined by the invisible

fig 4.14. Enormous crowds gather for some of the episodes of the 31-day long Ramlila of Ramnagar, north India, 1997. Photograph by Sam Schechner.

Saraswati river descending from heaven. Among the multitudes were many sages, *rishis*, and *sadhus* claiming to be avatars. The porosity of the boundaries between the human and the divine, combined with the ubiquity of maya-lila, make such manifestations inevitable. Raslila and Krishnalila – large-scale public enactments of the life of Krishna, Vishnu's sixth avatar -- are more like Ramlila: carefully staged large-scale public enactments. What happens at Ramlila, Raslila, and Krishnalila is not make-believe. Different orders of reality converge in the lilas. The young boys who are the *swarups* (forms of the gods) of Rama or Krishna not only enact but also embody the gods. Like temple *murtis* (paintings, statues, or other divine manifestations), they do not represent the gods, but are inhabited by them. Yet at the same time the boys remain children. If a swarup giggles, forgets his lines, falls asleep, or jokes with a friend, the spectators are not taken aback. The people say: "Cannot the god play? Is not this Bala Krishna [boy Krishna], full of mischief and sleep?" Rama is more "serious," a warrior and teacher -- yet inhabiting a pre-adolescent boy whose voice has not yet deepened. At Ramlila, people come to just look at him and his wife, Sita, mother of the world. Or to touch their feet, accept a lotus blossom from their hands (**see figure 4.16**). These devotees are face to face with gods, with boys, with maya–lila.

In a maya–lila world, the material universe is a playground. Everything that happens is part of Brahma's day or Vishnu's playing or Shiva's *tandava* dancing or dice game (**see Handelman and Shulman box**). According to one Indian version of the cosmos, Shiva's throw of the dice activates the universe -- or even more: the universe is a dice game, always at risk, a play of chance, always in motion.

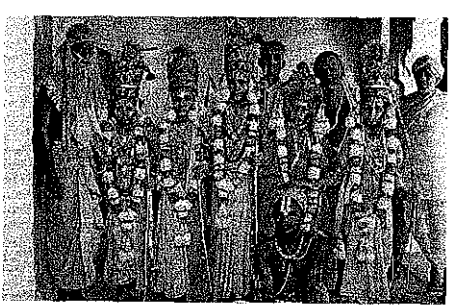


fig 4.15. Young boys become the *swarups* or "form of the gods" during Ramlila. The swarups are garlanded, crowned, adored, and worshipped, 1997. Photograph by Sam Schechner.

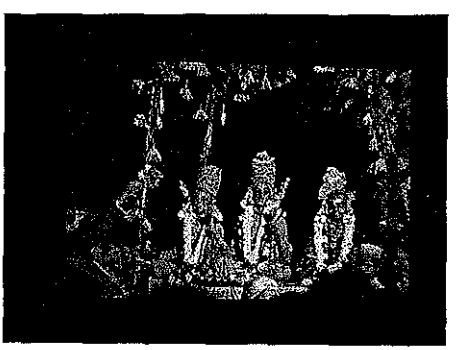


fig 4.16. A devotee touching the foot of Sita during the Ramlila of Ramnagar, 1977. Photograph by Richard Schechner.

Don Handelman and David Shulman

Siva's cosmic dice game

Siva often plays dice with the goddess – his consort, Parvati. Almost invariably, he loses to her. [. . .] Sometimes she becomes angry when he refuses to pay up, or even to acknowledge that he has lost; this stubborn stance may then lead to further conflict – aggressive acts by one or both partners, sulking, quarrels, separations, even curses hurled in rage. Or, still in a playful spirit, the goddess might cover Siva's eyes with her hands, thereby enveloping the universe itself in catastrophic darkness.

Nothing [. . .] is as rich in consequence as a game. Perhaps we should say *the* game. The dice match is in some sense equal to the cosmos, both a condensed expression of its process and a mode of activating and generating that process. If one is God, there is, finally, no other game. All the more shocking, then, is the fact that he must lose. No wonder that he is sometimes more than a little reluctant to play.

The dice throws, as is well known, correlate with the four *yugas*, the cosmic ages in their recursive, devolutionary sequence. Thus, time itself proceeds out of this divine game. Without the game, there would be no time, perhaps no space as well (for the dice also model the cardinal directions in horizontal alignment and in relation to the vertical vector of the zenith) – in short, no world as we know it: language, sexual differentiation and identity, self-knowledge – all these, too, [. . .] are part of the generative cycles of the game.

1997, *God Inside Out: Siva's Game of Dice*, 4–6.

The dice-game universe is a function of the dynamics of chance interacting with a supreme god's unbridled will. In the *Mahabharata*, one of the two great Sanskrit epics (the *Ramayana* is the other), the initiating action is a dice game where Yudhisthira loses everything – his wealth, his kingdom, and even his wife's clothing. In another origin/end of the world myth, Shiva's tandava dance – awakening and radiating *shakti*, a combined female–male energy – brings the universe into existence. At the end of time, when Brahma sleeps, Shiva dances existence into extinction. After eons, as Brahma awakens, Shiva starts dancing again, and the universe is created again, the same but different. For Indians, believing that the cosmos is a dance, a dream, a gamble – maya–lila – is not softheaded. Did Einstein know Shiva played dice?

In a maya–lila world, experience and reality are multiple, a plenitude of performed, transformable, non-exclusive events or play-worlds. If all realities and experiences shape each other, are networks of flexible constructs, transformations, dreams of dreams, unsettled relationships, what then of "ordinary play" – children playing tag or make-believe, grownups knocking a golf ball across the countryside, a rapt audience listening to a Brahms symphony? These kinds of things – adjusted to suit specific cultures – happen in India, and everywhere else. But the Indians and others who have not lost their unrational abilities are more tuned to sudden, delightful, or shocking transformations, the appearance of scary or farcical demons in the midst of an all-night performance, or a glimpse of the Absolute that Krishna reveals to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* (**see Vyasa box**). It was the *Gita* that **J. Robert Oppenheimer**, head of the scientific team that developed the atomic bomb, quoted on 16 July 1945 as he witnessed the world's first nuclear explosion: "If the light of a thousand suns were to rise in the sky at once [. . .]. I am time grown old, creating world destruction."

Vyasa

The absolute Krishna

Listen [Krishna tells Arjuna] as I recount for you in essence the divine powers of myself. Endless is my extent. [. . .] I am the beginning, middle, and end of creations. [. . .] I am indestructible time, the creator facing everywhere at once. [. . .] I am death the destroyer of all, the source of what will be, the feminine powers: fame, fortune, speech, memory, intelligence, resolve, patience. [. . .] I am the great ritual chant, the meter of sacred song, [. . .] I am the dice game of gamblers, [. . .] I am the epic poet Vyasa among sages, the inspired singer among bards.

1986 [c. 200 BCE], *The Bhagavad Gita*, 91–94

J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904–67): American nuclear physicist and director of the Manhattan Project, the team that developed and detonated the first atomic bomb in the New Mexico desert on 16 July 1945. From 1947 to 1952, Oppenheimer was chairman of the General Advisory Committee of the Atomic Energy Commission. Accused of being a Communist sympathizer, Oppenheimer lost his security clearance in 1953. In 1947 he became director of the Institute for Advanced Studies, which he led until his retirement in 1966.

Although binary models are tricky because they split into two opposing sides a world of nuances and continua, they can also be useful if used cautiously. I offer one here, contrasting the difference between maya–lila and the Western rational understandings of play (**see figure 4.17**).

Contrasting Attitudes Towards Play and Playing

Maya–Lila	Rationalist
Unending cycles of creating/destroying	Single creation
Multiple realities	Single reality
How the universe is	Make-believe
Playing is on a par with religion, art	Playing is on a par with art, but not as important as religion or as real as science
Creative–destructive	Creative
Everywhere	In playgrounds or other special places
Free	Rule bound
For everyone	For children mostly
All the time	After work
Fundamental	Recreational
Female–Male combined	Childlike, pre-sexual
Extremely powerful	Little power
Celebrates the erotic as the divine energy	Represses the erotic as "bad"

fig 4.17. Maya–lila is more volatile, creative–destructive, all-encompassing, and transformative than the rationalist view of play. In the West, especially since the Enlightenment, playing has been isolated, located in "after work," "recreation," or in childhood. However, in recent decades, partly because the world is more global, non-rationalist notions of playing have re-emerged in the West.

Deep play, dark play

In theatrical terms, maya–lila is an interweaving of the performer and the role. Is the role "real"? And if we can safely say of aesthetic performance – of Hamlet or Shakuntala or the Black Swan – that the role is not real, what of ritual performances such as the appearance of a pope in full regalia to bless the believers or the manifestation of an Afro-Brazilian orixa who "mounts" the body of a dancer in deep trance? In rituals there is no "suspension of disbelief." Rather there is "deep play" as understood by Geertz (**see Geertz box**).

Clifford Geertz

Deep play

Bentham's concept of "deep play" is found in his *The Theory of Legislation*. By it he means play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all. For if a man whose fortune is a thousand pounds (or ringgits [Balinese money]) wagers five hundred of it on an even bet, the marginal utility of the pound he stands to win is clearly less than the marginal disutility of the one he stands to lose. In genuine deep play, this is the case for both parties. They are both in over their heads. Having come together in the search of pleasure they have entered into a relationship which will bring the participants, considered collectively, net pain rather than net pleasure. [. . . D]espite the force of Bentham's analysis men do engage in such play, both passionately and often, and even in the face of law's revenge. For Bentham and those who think as he does (nowadays mainly lawyers, economists, and a few psychiatrists), the explanation is [. . .] that such men are irrational – addicts, fetishists, children, fools, savages, who need only to be protected against themselves. But for the Balinese, though naturally they do not formulate it in so many words, the explanation lies in the fact that in such play, money is less a measure of utility, had or expected, than it is a symbol of moral import, perceived or imposed. [. . .] In deep ones [play], where the amounts of money are great, much more is at stake than material gain: namely, esteem, honor, dignity, respect – in a word, though in Bali a profoundly freighted word, status.

1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 432–33

Geertz is writing about why some Balinese make ruinous bets on cockfights. Geertz's insight into deep play has broad implications. Deep play applies to mountain-climbing, high-speed auto-racing, and many other activities where there is very high risk physically, fiscally, and/or psychologically. Deep play involves such high stakes that one wonders why

people engage in it at all. As Geertz explains it, deep playing draws the whole person into what amounts to a life-and-death struggle expressing not only individual commitment (to the irrational even more than to the rational), but also cultural values. Deep play is all absorbing – and closely related to what I call **"dark play."**

dark play: "playing with fire," "breaking the rules," "getting away with murder." Playing that emphasizes risk, deception, and sheer thrill.

"Playing in the dark" means that some of the players don't know they are playing – like in a con game or when rats run a maze or when the gods or fate or chance lay traps to catch people in./Dark play is connected to maya–lila. Dark play involves fantasy, risk, luck, daring, invention, and deception. Dark play may be entirely private, known to the player alone. Or it can erupt suddenly, a bit of microplay, seizing the player(s) and then as quickly subsiding – a wisecrack, burst of frenzy, delirium, or deadly risk. Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules – so much so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed, as in spying, double-agentry, con games, and stings. Unlike carnivals or ritual clowns whose inversions of established order are sanctioned by the authorities, dark play is truly subversive, its agendas always hidden. Dark play rewards its players by means of deceit, disruption, and excess./In my courses on play, I invite students to write examples of dark play from their own lives. Here are four responses (used with permission):

1 *Female*: When I am feeling especially depressed or angry about the world and my life, I play a form of Russian Roulette with New York City traffic. I cross streets without pausing to see if it is safe to do so or not. [. . .] At the time of playing there is a thrill in abandoning precautions and in toying with the value of life and death.

2 *Female*: Sometimes I'll be in a bar with friends and some guy will hit on me. If I don't want anything to do with him, I ignore him. But if he persists, then I'll speak in my made-up language. Some guys get the hint. Others will try to understand me or ask me very loudly and very slowly, "WHERE ARE YOU FROM?" as if I'd suddenly understand them. When that happens, I'll engage a friend in my game. We'll converse in the made-up language until the guy gets so frustrated he leaves. The language sounds real. I've been practicing it ever since I was a kid.

3 *Male*: When I was 15 years old, together with three friends, I spent some nights in a youth hostel, a seventeenth-century castle, in a small fishing village in Holland. One night, the four of us discovered a trapdoor in the ceiling of the bathroom. We were convinced that this led to the roof of the castle. We saw many signs stating that the roof was off limits. For us, those signs were orders to get to the roof. We sneaked out of the dorm, went through the trapdoor and found some stairs. It was pitch dark, we could only find our way by touch. When we got to the roof, a very strong wind was blowing. We yelled into the storm, screamed obscenities, and cursed the hostel managers who made us all pray before each meal. We cursed the clouds, the Virgin Mary, the village. We yelled at the fishing boats we knew were out on the sea. "Go down, go down!" one of us yelled. "Sink boats, sink!" It became a chant. "Sink, boats, sink!" Just before dawn we were back in the dorm. We felt proud as hell. At 8 a.m. we were thrown out of the hostel. In a café, tired, sleepy but still excited, we drank our coffee. A local newspaper lay on the table. The headline said, "Two Fishermen Drown When Boat Sinks." One of us began to cry. I did not believe then, and do not believe now, and will never believe that we caused this accident. But it had an effect. For the next couple of days we did not play; hardly joked.

4 *Female*: I was 16 years old and on vacation at Yosemite with my father. I climbed out over the guardrail to get a better view of the waterfall. When I realized that my father was crying for me to come back, I went to the very edge and did an arabesque. I continued balancing on one leg until he got onto his knees, crying, begging for me to come back. Ten years later, in the Sierra Nevada range, I repeated the same act in front of my husband who shouted at me to think of our daughter as a motherless child. My initial inspiration for dancing on the edge was in both cases the thrill of the beauty and the danger of the dance. My father's and husband's anxiety sharpened the experience for me – the further I got away from them the closer I came to communion with some Other.

Leaving aside psychological interpretations of motives, personal gains, anxieties, desires played out, and so on, what do these examples show?

First, they subvert the metacommunicative message "this is play" that Gregory Bateson posited as necessary for play to begin, continue, and thrive. Second, in dark play, as in Boal's Invisible Theatre, some of the players do not know that a game is being played. The drivers of vehicles in New York City, the guys trying to decipher a "foreign" language in a bar, the fishermen caught in a storm – none of these knew they were players in a game. These "non-knowing players" –

innocents, dupes, butts, victims – are essential to the playing. In the third example, the chanting boys had no idea that their play might have an effect – and the author, a convinced rationalist, is certain that there was no connection between the curses and the sinking fishing boat. Still, the coincidence – always a key mark of fate – draws tears from one of the boys, their vacation was temporarily dampened, and the author still protests he has no such superpower.

The final example is complicated. This scene was played twice, ten years apart, testing first the love of a father and then of a husband. Still later, the dark-player provided me with a photograph of the re-enactment (**see figure 4.18**). The scene was played, replayed, documented, and now made public. At each iteration it becomes more of a performance. It is a test of love, but also a mocking of love; laughing at it, taunting it. The two life roles, husband and father, were conflated and devalued. The men were manipulated into begging the dancer to stop playing. The father shed tears; the husband reminded the dancer of her serious responsibilities as a mother. None of this brought the dancer back from the edge – in fact, quite the opposite: it heightened the "thrill of the beauty and the danger of the dance." The more the men were terrified, the more ecstatic the dancer. All anxiety left her and spilled into them. What was important to her was dancing on the edge. Liberated, she relished her spiritual experience. In having power over herself, she gained power over the two "patriarchal males" in her life (up to that point). And giving me the photo for this book? A final trump card sending the message to those who know and remember, a secret few.

Why do people create and enact dark play? Are children innocent of such play? Sutton-Smith offers examples of what

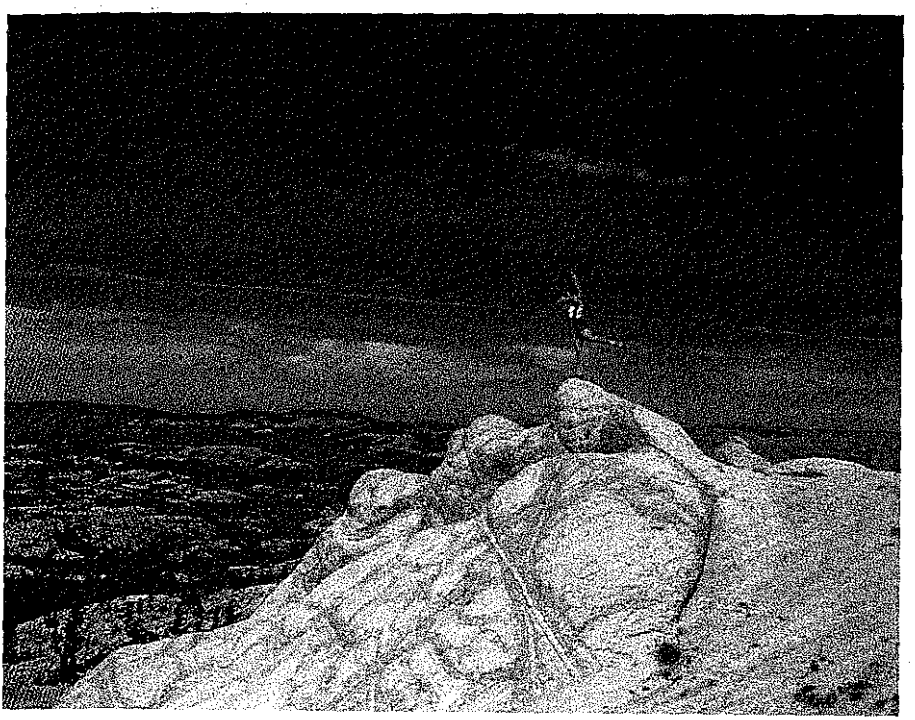


fig 4.18. An episode of dark play re-enacted on a rock at Yosemite National Park, USA. Photograph courtesy of the performer, name withheld.

he calls the "masks of play" -- play that conceals its purposes, even its existence. Children no less than adults engage in this kind of play. In school, camp, prison, and church – wherever the eyes of authority gaze down on them – kids find ways around the rules. They make April Fool's jokes, play in the toilet, whisper, doodle, make faces, mock adults, and so on. They form clubs, gangs, and cliques. They even develop careful strategies in order to shoot up a school.

All these activities -- the pleasant, the provocative, and the terrifying -- can be understood as playing, as ways of establishing autonomous social orders and hierarchies, of exploring or exploding the limits of power, of resisting the adult world that apparently so dominates them. Some of these children grow up to be spies, police, terrorists, colonels, con-men, and crooks -- all with sensible reasons for making dark play. But why do others engage in it? Assuming a new or alternative identity, even briefly, is very important. Masking, cloaking one's ordinary self just to get away from the humdrum, is also important. Much role-playing over the internet is this kind of dark play. Sometimes a person puts herself at risk to test her luck, to prove her value, to enact a special destiny. In life-risk play such as crossing the street without looking, one's "immortality" is tested. In dancing on the edge, one leaves behind the mundane, hears it screaming and begging, and soars toward a "communion with some Other." In disguise-play such as talking in an invented language, alternative selves are given license. The gratification and thrill of dark play involves everything from physical risk-taking to inventing new selves to engaging one's inner self to communion with the Other. There is something excitingly liberating about this kind of playing.

In dark play sometimes even the acknowledged players are not sure if they are playing or not. What begins as a game, as a gesture of bravado, can quickly get out of hand. More than a few have died on a dare. Survivors may claim they were "just fooling around." On the other hand, actions that were not play when they were performed become play retroactively when the events are retold. What happened does not change, but when a person recounts a "narrow escape," for example, what was deadly serious in the doing becomes playful in the retelling.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've examined play "as" performance, and play "is" performance. When animals and humans play, they exaggerate and show off in order to impress playmates as well as non-players who are watching (this is true of chimpanzees, gorillas, and monkeys as well as of humans). In most kinds of play, in order to play successfully, all the players must agree to play. Players send metacommunicative messages that say, "We are playing." In some ways, play is very much like ritual and theatre. Play is often an orderly sequence of actions performed in specified places for known durations of time. Much playing is narrational, with winners and losers, conflict, and the arousal and display of emotion. But there is also playing that is less formal-bursts of microplay that can lessen the tensions in a room or relieve the boredom of routinized work. Some play is "dark," making fun of people, deceiving them, or leading them on. One group of play theorists sees playing as the foundation of human culture, art and religion especially. Others regard play as an ambivalent activity both supporting and subverting social structures and arrangements. However one looks at it, play and playing are fundamentally performative.

TALK ABOUT

1. Anonymously write out your dark-play experiences. Put the papers in the middle of a table and select several at random to read out loud. How do these examples fit the theories of Geertz and Bateson? What happens when the metamessage "this is play" is subverted?
2. What is the relationship between flow, discussed in this chapter, and communitas, discussed in Chapter 2?

PERFORM

1. Teach a group from the class how to play a game you used to play as a child. Don't theorize, but rather convey only what's required to play the game. After playing, discuss the structure of the game. Does it have a beginning, middle, and end? How do you know when to stop? Are the rules stable? Or are they obscure and subject to change? What signals are used to send the message "this is play"? Did the group find the game enjoyable? Why or why not?
2. Using Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre technique, prepare a brief scene. Perform your scene in a public place without letting on that it is "theatre." Have a designated observer or observers note how the scene is received by people. Afterwards, discuss the reactions. Was what you performed theatre? If not, why not? What was it if not theatre?

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