46
Play

Matthew Thomas Payne

Play is doing; play is being. Play is orderly, procedural, and rule-bound; play is disruptive, anarchic, and rebellious. Rules provide a context for playful action (Sigart 2014), and yet, rules can never predict what players will do. Play is as precocious as it is precarious; it can spring into life one instant, only to be dashed to pieces in the next. Play's experiential complexity underscores the need for critical media scholars to attend to media culture as lived, meaning-making acts and not simply as discrete texts or by-products of larger industrial structures.

Play is a valuable keyword for media studies both because it underscores that making sense of popular media requires audiences to participate in meaning-making processes (i.e., they have to play media makers' sometimes proverbial, sometimes literal games), and because it emphasizes that these interpretive practices have political stakes and consequences when audiences break from producers' expectations. This might seem like a stretch. Play, after all, isn't typically associated with scholarly inquiry or with worldly ramifications. Rather, the abandonment and imagination that give rise to states of play typically connote an escape from careful reflection or issues of social import. Play remains an underrecognized force in media studies because it is an oft-ignored element of media generally.

Play's etymological derivation from the Old English *plegan* or *plegian*, meaning "to exercise" or "brisk movement or activity" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), points to its root conceptualization as an act. Game studies has been quick to emphasize play's usefulness in assessing the significance of goal-oriented actions in digital and analog games, with Alexander Galloway (2006, 2) going so far as to identify "actions" as being "word one for video game theory." But while play's insights are particularly salient to game studies, critical media scholars should likewise consider play's role in animating non-game texts, be it the parodic intertextuality that gives "satire TV" (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009) its political bite, or the complex canon building of the Marvel Cinematic Universe that unites characters and storylines across film, TV, and comics. Thinking seriously about play highlights how interacting with media demands audiences engage in boundary exploration and rule testing, and how acts of media play can lead to personal transformation.

Because play is the freedom of movement within boundaries, play theorists have long attempted to define its relationship to and differentiation against non-play spaces and practices. Johan Huizinga, one of the first scholars to make a case for the civilizing effects of organized play on Western culture, noted how play unfolds in specific spaces with specific rules. One of the "play-grounds" he enumerates—alongside the tennis court, card table, stage, and screen—is that of the "magic circle," a social membrane that envelopes those engaged in a playful activity (1955, 10). Although others have since refined Huizinga's original conceptualization, the magic circle remains a bedrock concept because it captures both spatially if not experientially the ineffable sensation of playing between realms and how social groups utilize play to advance their agendas. The cultural politics of play suffuse everyday media: the display of military might of a Blue Angels flyover before a televised football game; the techno-utopian positivism of Walt Disney's Tomorrowland exhibit

(Telotte 2004); the hypermasculinity of arcade games (Kocurek 2015).

Building on Huizinga's work, Roger Caillois (2001) sought to better define play's variability by creating a typology of game modes, and by proposing a play spectrum that ranges from highly regulated interactions such as chess (ludus) to open-ended activities that might include children playing with blocks or spinning around until they fall down (paidia). While such labels are useful for categorization, play is unrelentingly fuzzy. To wit, media firms' utilization of alternative reality games—activities that integrate imaginary worlds and characters into real-world spaces—strategically exploit play's porous boundaries for promotional purposes. Moreover, because play unfolds in real-world spaces, magic circles are ready-made targets for cheaters and spoilsports (Consalvo 2007). Indeed, children regularly reify hegemonic social norms (e.g., class, gender, sexuality) through "innocent" games of "cowboys and Indians" or "playing house," and players challenge the magic circle's mystical aura by altering its seemingly sacrosanct rules of play.

The magic circle's vulnerability to ne'er-do-wells illustrates that play is not simply about borders, but is likewise about communities of play. Anthropologist Victor Turner's (1982) emphasis on the liminality of rituals, where participants are caught in identity spaces "betwixt and between" and where those from different backgrounds can access a common experience, stresses the communal value of media rituals. The spectrum of playful engagement that makes media sites of celebration and derision—from affirming cosplay to social media trolling—begs additional questions about the rules that govern how media should be played.

Despite play's definitional challenges, we can say with certainty that there is no media culture without play. Mediated play is predicated on interacting with rules—be they explicit or implicit in nature. Game studies is again instructive for its attention to understanding how the cultural industries' offerings contain mechanics and rule-based prompts that solicit a range of intertextual play practices.

Reframing media practice as media play (and not simply as a discrete, empirical happening) injects additional agency into the analyst's interpretive frame while simultaneously highlighting how the media object has been engineered with active audiences in mind. Indeed, contemporary media increasingly function as magic circle generators that are crafted with the playful user in mind at textual and extratextual levels. Consider, for example, the narrative puzzles featured in TV dramas like *Lost* that invite crowdsourced solutions (Mittell 2015), how transmedia storytelling leaps platforms in *The Matrix* (Jenkins 2006), or how the aural intimacy of an investigative podcast like *Serial* can turn legions of listeners onto new forms of radio "soundwork" (Hilmes 2013). Play is a central part of media's extratextual design strategies, too, be it as a programming block's televisual flow, or the paratextual elements of an advertising campaign (Gray 2010).

Play is potentially transformative boundary exploration that allows players to examine issues that might, in another context, seem immutably fixed. In play, media users get to try things on: they change avatars in games; toy with narrative strategies and representational tropes in fan fiction; and time shift viewing experiences with DVRs. But to engender personal change, play requires a leap of faith; it demands that players adopt what philosopher Bernard Suits (2005) calls a "lusory attitude." The value of the lusory attitude for critical analysis is that we can learn about ourselves and our media when we open ourselves up to the vulnerability of play; by risking failure in games or rejection by peers in a fan forum, we stand to learn and grow through playful experimentation.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), the leading play scholar of the twentieth century, argues against any universal definition due to play's varying manifestations and how disciplines have grappled with its resolute ambiguity. Sutton-Smith reminds us that any attempt to linguistically fix a ludic experience is not the same thing as that experience. Play is thus not only a highly individuated phenomenon; it is also—in some real way—beyond language. Textuality's rigid and permeable definitional boundaries, the fixed and shifting rules of play, and the varying investments of community and of self in media culture are useful reminders that human play is a historically specific and contextual event. And because play is in a perpetual state of emerging and vanishing, it is a generative term for thinking about media's critical potentiality as something that reflects existing mores and values, and as something that holds out promise for possible futures that might yet be imagined.

47
Policy

Jennifer Holt

Media policy is about power—the power to establish boundaries, norms, and standards for mass-mediated visual culture; the power to decide which perspectives will be informing social discourses, debates, news, and entertainment; and the power to police the expression, ownership, and distribution of that content. In other words, policy is in many ways about the structural power to determine "who can say what, in what form, to whom" (Garnham 2000, 4). Policy is political and is often guided by dominant ideologies regarding technology, culture, and national identity. It is what dictates the legal parameters for the structure, content, and dissemination of television, radio, and increasingly streaming digital media.

In the United States, the origins of contemporary media policy can be traced back to the Progressive Era, when administrative agencies and trust-busting were on the rise, and "the world of 'policy' came to be defined by a search for a kind of government-by-expertise that rested on neutral, objective, and in some sense scientific principles" (Streeter 2013, 490). Antitrust policy was formally instituted by the late nineteenth/early twentieth century after the Sherman Act was passed in 1890. This allowed for a form of regulation and control over industry structure, and a legal remedy (albeit underutilized) for undue concentration and anticompetitive behavior. While there is a deep historical investment in policy and the policy-making process as "neutral," policy is undeniably politicized at every stage (see Freedman