

Play and Ambiguity

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Context

The Ambiguity of Play (Harvard University Press, 1997) known also as *The Rhetorics of Play* from which this essay is taken, is a deconstructive account of the play theories of the past 100 years. It demonstrates that there has been little universal science but rather a series of arguments favoring the views (the rhetorics) that play should be conceptualized as about Progress (largely meaning cognition), or about Fate (games of chance); about Power (sports contests); about Identity (festivals); about self or narcissism (peak experience). The book concludes with the suggestion that what all of these rhetorics may have in common is their relative resonance of adaptive variability.

Speaking of Games

What Is Play?

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*A nip is but a nip
And a boojum
Is but a buttercup.*

after Lewis Carroll

We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity. Some of the most outstanding scholars of children's play have been concerned by this ambiguity. For example, classical scholar Mihail Spariosu (1989) calls play "amphibolous," which means it goes in two directions at once and is not clear. Victor Turner (1969), the anthropologist, calls play "liminal" or "liminoid," meaning that it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality, as if, for example, it were on the beach between the land and the sea. Geoffrey Bateson (1956), biologist, suggests that play is a paradox because it both is and is not what it appears to be. Animals at play bite each other playfully, knowing that the playful nip connotes a bite, but not what a bite connotes. In turn, Richard Schechner (1988), dramaturge, suggests that a playful nip is not only not a bite, it is also *not* not a bite. That is, it is a positive, the sum of two negatives. Which is again to say that the playful nip may not be a bite, but it is indeed what a bite means.

Kenneth Burke's works suggest that play is probably what he terms a "dramatic negative," which means that for animals who do not have any way of saying "no," it is a way of indicating the negative through an affirmative action that is clearly not the same as that which it represents (thus, again, nipping rather than biting). He says that prior to the evolutionary emergence of words, the negative could be dramatized only by the presentation of stylized and gestural forms of the positive (Burke, 1966, p. 423). "The most irritating feature of play," says Robert Fagen (1981), leading animal play theorist, "is not the perceptual incoherence, as such, but rather that play taunts us with its inaccessibility. We feel that something is behind it all, but we do not know, or have forgotten how to see it."

If we seek greater definitional clarity by analyzing the meaning of ambiguity itself, following William Empson's classic *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1955), then we can say that play involves all of his seven types, which are as follows, with the play examples in parentheses:

1. the ambiguity of reference (is that a pretend gun sound, or are you choking?);
2. the ambiguity of the referent (is that an object or a toy?);
3. the ambiguity of intent (do you mean it, or is it pretend?);
4. the ambiguity of sense (is this serious, or is it nonsense?);
5. the ambiguity of transition (you said you were only playing);
6. the ambiguity of contradiction (a man playing at being a woman);
7. the ambiguity of meaning (is it play or playfighting?).

And finally, as if all these paradoxes were not enough, Stephen Jay Gould, evolutionist, says that there are some human traits that are just side effects of more fundamental genetic functions and really deserve no functional explanation themselves. The quotation that heads this chapter, and those in the chapters that follow, would suggest that, if that is the case, there are nevertheless many interesting things about our so-called junk genes. The quotations at the beginning of each chapter also often bring up interesting rhetorics from much earlier times. Many authors use children's play as a metaphor for the ephemerality of life, for what quickly passes, or for what is innocent, infantile, or foolish. Others who are quoted render adult life as a very serious mortal game in which foul play is possible. The diversity of this metaphoric playfulness would seem to suggest that, whether junk or not, play takes on multiple forms in somber discourse.¹

This chapter is a search for some of the more obvious possible reasons for the ambiguity, as well as an introduction to the particular focus of the volume as a whole: the ideological underpinnings of play theories, and what an understanding of them can contribute to clearing up these confusions. The ambiguity is most obvious, however, in the multiple forms of play and the diversity of the kinds of play scholarship they have instigated. Obviously the word *play* stands for a category of very diverse happenings, though the same could be said about most omnibus categories, such as, for example, religion, art, war, politics, and culture.

The Diversity of Play Forms and Experiences

The diversity of play is well illustrated by the varied kinds of play that are to be found within the larger menagerie of the "play" sphere. Almost anything can allow play to occur within its boundaries, as is illustrated, for example, by works on tourism as play (McCannell, 1976),

television as play (Stephenson, 1967), day-dreaming as play (Caughey, 1984), sexual intimacy as play (Betcher, 1987), and even gossip as play (Spack, 1986). Travel can be a playful competition to see who can go to the most places or have the most authentic encounters. "Have you done London, the Eiffel Tower, Ayres Rock, Palmer Station, and Easter Island?" Watching television can be watching and identifying with other people at play, whether in fiction or in real life—and, after all, one can turn it off or on, which makes it like play and not like real life. Viewers can control their involvement just as if the "play" belongs to them, as in "playing" with the channels. Even the news, which is "live at five," is only an account from a studio with theatrical backdrops. All of us carry dozens of characters around in our daydreams with whom we carry on imaginary encounters and conversations, none of which are real in the usual sense. Many of the characters in our heads are also people on television or in films, but most are everyday acquaintances. Sexual intimates are said to play with each other in innumerable ways, painting each other's bodies, eating food off of each other, playing hide the thimble with bodily crevices, communicating in public with their own esoteric vocabulary, and, in general, teasing and testing each other with playful impropriety. Gossip, by contrast, can be a playfully irreverent game of denigrating those who are not present.

A list of activities that are often said to be play forms or play experiences themselves is presented below. The terms illustrate the great diversity of play phenomena, although they do not indicate the even wider extension of informal play through all other spheres of life. This list itself awaits both adequate description and adequate play theorizing, because the items that it contains are often typically called by other names, such as entertainments, recreations, pastimes, and hobbies, as if it would be an embarrassment to admit that they can also be called play. Each of these states of mind, activities, or events could be described as I have described with travel and gossip, above. The boundaries between them are never as discrete as listing them here might imply. They are arranged in order from the mostly more private to the mostly more public.

Mind or subjective play: dreams, daydreams, fantasy, imagination, ruminations, reveries, Dungeons and Dragons, metaphors of play, and playing with metaphors.

Solitary play: hobbies, collections, (model trains, model airplanes, model power boats, stamps), writing to pen pals, building models, listening to records and compact discs, constructions, art projects, gardening, flower arranging, using computers, watching

videos, reading and writing, novels, toys, travel, Civil War reenactments, music, pets, reading, woodworking, yoga, antiquing, flying, auto racing, collecting and rebuilding cars, sailing, diving, astrology, bicycling, handicrafts, photography, shopping, backpacking, fishing, needlework, quilting, bird watching, crosswords, and cooking.

Playful behaviors: playing tricks, playing around, playing for time, playing up to someone, playing a part, playing down to someone, playing upon words, making a play for someone, playing upon others as in tricking them, playing hob, putting something into play, bringing it into play, holding it in play, playing fair, playing by the rules, being played out, playing both ends against the middle, playing one's cards well, playing second fiddle.

Informal social play: joking, parties, cruising, travel, leisure, dancing, roller-skating, losing weight, dinner play, getting laid, potlucks, malls, hostessing, babysitting, Saturday night fun, rough and tumble, creative anachronism, amusement parks, intimacy, speech play (riddles, stories, gossip, jokes, nonsense), singles clubs, bars and taverns, magic, ham radio, restaurants, and the Internet.

Vicarious audience play: television, films, cartoons, concerts, fantasy-lands, spectator sports, theater, jazz, rock music, parades (Rose Bowl, mummers', Thanksgiving), beauty contests, stock-car racing, Renaissance festivals, national parks, comic books, folk festivals, museums, and virtual reality.

Performance play: playing the piano, playing music, being a play actor, playing the game for the game's sake, playing New York, playing the fishes, playing the horses, playing Iago, play voices, play gestures, playbills, playback, play by play, player piano, playgoing, playhouses, playlets.

Celebrations and festivals: birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Halloween, gifting, banquets, roasts, weddings, carnivals, initiations, balls, Mardi Gras, Fastnacht, Odunde.

Contests (games and sports): athletics, gambling, casinos, horses, lotteries, pool, touch football, kite fighting, golf, parlor games, drinking, the Olympics, bullfights, cockfights, cricket, Buzkashi, poker, gamesmanship, strategy, physical skill, chance, animal contests, archery, arm wrestling, board games, card games, martial arts, gymnastics.

Risky or deep play: caving, hang gliding, kayaking, rafting, snowmobiling, orienteering, snowballing, and extreme games such as bungee jumping, windsurfing, sport climbing, skateboarding, mountain biking, kite skiing, street luge, ultrarunning, and sky jumping:

The Diversity of Players, Play Agencies, and Play Scenarios

The ambiguity of play, as well as lying in this great diversity of play forms, owes some of its force to the parallel diversity of the players. There are infant, preschool, childhood, adolescent, and adult players, all of whom play somewhat differently. There are male and female players. There are gamblers, gamesters, sports, and sports players, and there are playboys and playgirls, playfellows, playful people, playgoers, playwrights, playmakers, and playmates. There are performers who play music and act in plays and perhaps play when they paint, sing, or sculpt. There are dilettantes, harlequins, clowns, tricksters, comedians, and jesters who represent a kind of characterological summit of playfulness. There are even playful scholars, such as Paul Feyerabend (1995), Jacques Derrida (1980), and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Playful persons in literature and the arts are countless.

Then there is the diversity of multiple kinds of play equipment, such as balls, bats, goals, cards, checkers, roulettes, and toys. Practically anything can become an agency for some kind of play. The scenarios of play vary widely also, from playpens, playrooms, playhouses, and playgrounds to sports fields, circuses, parade grounds, and casinos. Again, while some playfulness is momentary, other kinds, with their attendant preparations, can last throughout a season (as in many festivals and team sports) and, in some cases, over periods of years, as in the World Cup and the Olympics. Play has temporal diversity as well as spatial diversity.

The Diversity of Play Scholarship

Although most people throughout history have taken for granted their own play, and in some places have not even had a word for it, since about 1800 in Western society, intellectuals of various kinds have talked more or less systematically and more or less scientifically about play, and have discovered that they have immense problems in conceptualizing it. Presumably this is in part because there are multiple kinds of play and multiple kinds of players, as described above. Different academic disciplines also have quite different play interests. Some study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language—and they all use the word *play* for these quite different things. Furthermore their play theories, which are the focus of this present work, rather than play itself, come to reflect these various diversities and make them even more variable.

For example, biologists, psychologists, educators, and sociologists tend to focus on how play is adaptive or contributes to growth, development, and socialization. Communication theorists tell us that play is a form of metacommunication far preceding language in evolution because it is also found in animals. Sociologists say that play is an imperial social system that is typically manipulated by those with power for their own benefit. Mathematicians focus on war games and games of chance, important in turn because of the data they supply about strategy and probability. Thermonuclear war games, it appears, can be either a hobby or deadly serious. Anthropologists pursue the relationships between ritual and play as these are found in customs and festivals, while folklorists add an interest in play and game traditions. Art and literature, by contrast, have a major focus on play as a spur to creativity. In some mythology scholarship, play is said to be the sphere of the gods, while in the physical sciences it is sometimes another name for the indeterminacy or chaos of basic matter. In psychiatry, play offers a way to diagnose and provide therapy for the inner conflicts of young and old patients alike. And in the leisure sciences, play is about qualities of personal experience, such as intrinsic motivation, fun, relaxation, escape, and so on. No discipline is, however, so homogeneous that all its members are funneled into only one such way of theorizing. Nevertheless the diversity exists, and it makes reconciliation difficult.

Finally there are the ambiguities that seem particularly problematic in Western society, such as why play is seen largely as what children do but not what adults do; why children play but adults only recreate; why play is said to be important for children's growth but is merely a diversion for adults. The most reviled form of play, gambling, is also the largest part of the national play budget. How can it be that such ecstatic adult play experiences, which preoccupy so much emotional time, are only diversions? And why do these adult play preoccupations, which seem like some vast cultural, even quasi-religious subconsciousness, require us to deny that this kind of play may have the same meaning for children?

The Rhetorical Solution

It is the intent of the present work to bring some coherence to the ambiguous field of play theory by suggesting that some of the chaos to be found there is due to the lack of clarity about the popular cultural rhetorics that underlie the various play theories and play terms. The word *rhetoric* is used here in its modern sense, as being a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to

persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs. In a sense, whenever identification is made with a belief or a cause or a science or an ideology, that identification reveals itself by the words that are spoken about it, by the clothes and insignia worn to celebrate it, by the allegiances adopted to sustain it, and by the hard work and scholarly devotion to it, as well as by the theories that are woven within it (Burke, 1950). Authors seek to persuade us in innumerable ways that their choice and their direction of research or study is sound. These identifications of theirs, and their persuasiveness, implicit or otherwise, are the intellectual odor that is to be known here as their rhetoric. It needs to be stressed that what is to be talked about here as rhetoric, therefore, is not so much the substance of play or of its science or of its theories, but rather the way in which the underlying ideological values attributed to these matters are both subsumed by the theorists and presented persuasively to the rest of us. As the term is used here, the rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them. Having said that, however, it must be admitted that it is still almost impossible to suppress the desire to ask the question: "Yes, all right, but what is play itself?"—an impulse that the reader needs to stifle for now, though it will not go untrifled with before this work is played out.

It follows that all the sciences, physical and social, whatever their empirical virtues, are presented here as being maintained by rhetorical means, whether these be seen optimistically, for example, as the "scientific attitude," or somewhat more cynically, as the way in which disciplines, through controlling a knowledge base, enhance their own political power (Foucault, 1973). In what follows, the rhetorics that are the focus of this work will be called popular ideological rhetorics, and where necessary, these will be distinguished from what are called scientific or scholarly rhetorics, as well as from disciplinary rhetorics and personal rhetorics. The popular rhetorics are large-scale cultural "ways of thought" in which most of us participate in one way or another, although some specific groups will be more strongly advocates for this or that particular rhetoric. The larger play rhetorics are part of the multiple broad symbolic systems—political, religious, social, and educational—through which we construct the meaning of the cultures in which we live. It should be made clear that I do not assume these value presuppositions to be necessarily in vain or negative, nor to be without considerable value to those committed to them. In fact, it is impossible to live without them. The issue is only whether, by becoming confused with our play theories, they set us in pursuit

of false explanations or false grandiosity. One promise of such an analysis as I propose is that, by revealing these rhetorical underpinnings of the apparently diverse theoretical approaches to play, there is the possibility of bridging them within some more unifying discourse. *The Recovery of Rhetoric* (Roberts and Good, 1993) offers much optimism for the possibilities of a more genuinely interdisciplinary organization of any subject matter, not excluding that of play. However, opinion has to be reserved on the integrating promise of rhetorical analysis until there is an examination of the present popular rhetorics specific to play and their interaction with the scholarly studies that have arisen around them. It is just as possible that the rhetorics, when explicated, will be revealed to be themselves a deceptive gloss over other, far more fundamental cultural disagreements. For example, play's supposed frivolity may itself be a mask for play's use in more widespread systems for denigrating the play of other groups, as has been done characteristically throughout history by those of higher status against the recreations of those of lower status (Armitage, 1977).

Seven Rhetorics

The seven rhetorics to be presented in this work are characterized as follows.

The rhetoric of play as progress, usually applied to children's play, is the advocacy of the notion that animals and children, but not adults, adapt and develop through their play. This belief in play as progress is something that most Westerners cherish, but its relevance to play has been more often assumed than demonstrated. Most educators over the past two hundred years seem to have so needed to represent playful imitation as a form of children's socialization and moral, social, and cognitive growth that they have seen play as being primarily about development rather than enjoyment.

The rhetoric of play as fate is usually applied to gambling and games of chance, and it contrasts totally with the prior rhetoric. It is probably the oldest of all of the rhetorics, resting as it does on the belief that human lives and play are controlled by destiny, by the gods, by atoms or neurons, or by luck, but very little by ourselves, except perhaps through the skillful use of magic or astrology. This rhetoric enjoys only an underground advocacy in the modern world. It is no longer a widespread and conscious value system among the intellectual elites, though it remains popular among lower socioeconomic groups. It contrasts most strongly also with those modern theories of leisure that argue that the distinguishing feature of play is that it is an exercise of free choice.

The rhetoric of play as power, usually applied to sports, athletics, and contests, is—like fate, community identity, and frivolity—a rhetoric of ancient hue. These four all predate modern times and advocate collectively held community values rather than individual experiences. Recently these ancient rhetorics have been given much less philosophical attention than the modern three, progress, the imaginary, and the self, though they are more deep seated as cultural ideologies. The rhetoric of play as power is about the use of play as the representation of conflict and as a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes. This rhetoric is as ancient as warfare and patriarchy. It is an anathema to many modern progress- and leisure-oriented play theorists.

The rhetoric of play as identity, usually applied to traditional and community celebrations and festivals, occurs when the play tradition is seen as a means of confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of the community of players. Because so much twentieth-century attention has been given to children's play as a form of progress, I have found it valuable to present a more balanced rhetorical advocacy of the character of their play from the point of view of these other rhetorics, power and fantasy.

The rhetoric of play as the imaginary, usually applied to playful improvisation of all kinds in literature and elsewhere, idealizes the imagination, flexibility, and creativity of the animal and human play worlds. This rhetoric is sustained by modern positive attitudes toward creativity and innovation. The rhetoric of progress, the rhetoric of the self, and the rhetoric of the imaginary constitute the modern set of rhetorics, with a history largely elaborated ideologically only in the past two hundred years.

The rhetoric of the self is usually applied to solitary activities like hobbies or high-risk phenomena like bungee jumping, but it need not be so proscribed. These are forms of play in which play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players—their fun, their relaxation, their escape—and the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances. Here the central advocacies of the secular and consumerist manner of modern life invade the interpretations of play and are questioned because of their twentieth-century relativity.

The rhetoric of play as frivolous is usually applied to the activities of the idle or the foolish. But in modern times, it inverts the classic "work ethic" view of play, against which all the other rhetorics exist as rhetorics of rebuttal. But frivolity, as used here, is not just the puritanic negative, it is also a term to be applied more to historical trickster figures and fools,

who were once the central and carnivalesque persons who enacted playful protest against the orders of the ordained world. This chapter is placed last in this work because of its largely reflexive character, as commentary on all the other rhetorics. Historically frivolity belongs with the ancient set that includes fate, power, and identity.

I should note that although each of these rhetorics is discussed in the singular, there are multiple variants within each category, so that it might be more proper to speak of the plural *rhetorics* throughout. To repeat, each is called a rhetoric because its ideological values are something that the holders like to persuade others to believe in and to live by. Much of the time such values do not even reach a level of conscious awareness. People simply take it for granted, for example, that children develop as a result of their playing; or that sports are a part of the way in which different states and nations compete with each other; or that festivals are a way in which groups are bonded together; or that play is a desirable modern form of creativity or personal choice; or that, contrary to all of these, play is a waste of time. By seeing how the play descriptions and play theories can be tied in with such broad patterns of ideological value, one has greater hope of coming to understand the general character of play theory, which is the ultimate objective here.

A Scale of Rhetorics

These seven play rhetorics can be illuminated by contrasting them, on the one hand, with rhetorics that are broader than they are, and on the other, with rhetorics that are narrower. Of the broader kind are those that derive from beliefs about religion, politics, social welfare, crime, and morality—that is, from all the matters that priests, politicians and salespersons constantly harangue folks about. These are the rhetorics that fill the airwaves of daily life, in churches, in schools, and in the community. People cannot live without them, even if they often can't stand some of them. They constitute the incessant discourse about who we are and how we should live. The group of rhetorics for the particular subject matter play are of the same broad kind, being about progress and power, but they are more limited in the present usage because they are applied only to the specific subject of play theories. The rhetorics of science are generally of a narrower and more explicit kind. Science, after all, has its own epistemological rhetorics of reliability, validity, and prediction. Scholarship in general has its required consistency, coherence, and authenticity. All of these scientific and scholarly tenets are also rhetorics, because they assume and propagate the view that there is a knowable

world, or a knowable text, and then, acting as if that assumption is real (a hypothetical fiction), proceed to their methodological undertakings. As Pepper (1961) has shown, even philosophical scholars must make arbitrary distinctions about which part of the world they seek to study, some focusing on the structures or forms of reality, some on the causes of reality and behavior, others on the changing historical context in which these things occur, and yet others on the kinds of integration or organicism that they can discover. What is added here to any such "scientific" (play) rhetorics is that the subject-matter rhetorics (those seven listed above) may be able to suggest why the scientific rhetorics take the direction they do—and also suggest why that direction may often have limitations deriving not so much from the science or scholarship, but from the presuppositions of the value systems in which the science is embedded. Parenthetically, the present focus on such presuppositions is not meant to suggest that "objective" social science is without value, or that "objectivity" is not fruitful within the ideological frames being presented. My aim here is much more modest, it seeks only for the sources of ambiguity in play rhetoric.

In the past several decades the claims of scholarship or science for sheer objectivity have been frequently challenged. The limitations of the claims for scholarly literature's independence from propaganda are challenged by Burke in such works as *The Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) and *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966). The same orientation is made a criticism of general scientific objectivity by Kuhn's now famous *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), in which he points out the role played by human motivation in the development of science, particularly in respect to the way in which accepted theories often are not displaced until a new generation of thinkers finds them irrelevant. Science is not as cumulative or as autonomously objective in the growth of its knowledge as has often been supposed. But the roots of the present enterprise can be found in the work of many other scholars as well, from Wittgenstein's emphasis on the meaning of language relying on its context of usage, for example, to Foucault's stricture that knowledge is always an exercise of power, never merely information. Those who create information are those who decide how others shall think about their lives. Leading play theorists who quite explicitly see themselves talking about the rhetorics of play in order to talk about play theory at all include Helen Schwartzman (1978), Margaret Duncan (1988), and Mihail Spariosu (1989).

Between the historically based subject-matter rhetorics that will be presented here (progress, power, and so on) and the most general scientific epistemological rhetorics, which

involve, for example, the metaphysical assumptions underlying the expectancy of causal regularities in nature, a host of other disciplinary rhetorics also play their part in the amalgam that is social science. Elsewhere, for example, I have described rhetorics that are applied to childhood in modern life, with children variously being seen as: the child of god, the child as the future, the predictable child, the imaginary child, the child as consumer, and the gender androgynous child (Sutton-Smith, 1994).

But the physical scientists are not immune to such rhetorics either, and there are disputes about how the public should interpret the personality of their science in the culture. These can be called questions about the ontological rhetorics of the scientists. They may be seen as "objective" or "cautious," but at times they are also seen as rebels, subversives, Frankensteins, relentless creatures of reason, conquerors of nature, empirical reductionists, mathematical formalists, artists, philosophers, secular saints, or irresponsible devils. And as Dyson (1995) shows, these kinds of rhetorics, when personal to the scientists, make an enormous difference in the direction of their inquiries. One might conclude that all scholars are creatures of their personal disposition, which may become a motivating rhetoric for them, and they are also, historically, inheritors of larger ideological or cultural patterns that affect their scholarship. They are the legatees as well of the rhetorics of disciplinary assumptions and disciplinary methodologies.

What needs most emphasis at this initial point is that rhetorical involvement at some or all of these levels is inescapable. Scholarly objectivity always exists within such contexts as broad cultural rhetorics (political, religious, moral), disciplinary rhetorics (sciences, humanities, arts), epistemological rhetorics (validity, reliability, causalism, formism), subject-matter rhetorics (in the present case, play rhetorics), general ontological rhetorics (objectivity, scientific caution), and personal rhetorics (idiosyncratic dispositions).

Within the subject of the present inquiry (play), the major emphasis is on the way in which the theories within this scholarly domain are underlain by the seven rhetorics outlined above. As William Kessen, a leading scholar of such reflexive self-consciousness in developmental psychology, states that we should

recognize that, deeply carved into our professional intention is a desire to change the lives of our readers, to have them believe something that we believe. In grand nineteenth-century style, we can call this the Unspoken Intention that is hidden by the wonderful devices all of us have learned to speak with the voice of certain authority....

Our work is packed with our values, our intentions for our small part of the world: a great deal would be gained by a critical analysis and display of those intentions, [but] the governing principle for evidence in both psychology and history [is that] we do not seek proofs; we do not attempt demonstrations. We all want to tell plausible stories. (1993, p. 229)

Validating the Existence of the Seven Rhetorics

Though it is not difficult to assert in a general way that the science of play is underlain by these seven subject-matter narratives, or rhetorics, the assertion itself has fairly vague “scientific” or “scholarly” cogency without some criteria of coherence that can be used to affirm their presence.

The criteria I use to frame the rhetorical contentions are as follows:

1. That the assumed seven rhetorics can be shown to have a clear basis in well known cultural attitudes of a contemporary or historical kind. This historical context, although not dealt with in great detail here, is the most basic source of their cultural construction (Glassie, 1982).
2. That the rhetorics have their own specific groups of advocates, a necessary precondition if these phenomena are to be seen as not just narratives but also rhetorics of persuasion.
3. That each rhetoric applies primarily to a distinct kind of play or playfulness. If this is so, it suggests some kind of epistemological affinity between the rhetorics and their ludic subject matter. They are not accidentally correlated.
4. That each rhetoric applies primarily to distinct kinds of players.
5. That there is an affinity between the rhetoric and particular scholarly or scientific disciplines, and between particular play theories and play theorists.
6. That (following criteria 2 through 5), there is a “matching” interplay between the nature of the rhetorical assertions and the character of the forms of play to which they are applied. Thus a rhetoric of progress might find partial substantiation in the finding that some kinds of skill during play can take “progressive” forms. In addition it may be possible to show that the rhetoric itself is often the way in which the play passes into the culture, because the play practice is thus justified ideologically. In this way, the two, play and rhetoric, have an impact on each other. The recommendation that the interplay between play and nonplay should be more carefully studied was made by the famous play theorist

Erik Erikson in his book *Toys and Reasons* (1977). But this recommendation is also the constant beguilement of all those who study the interrelationships between play and nonplay to try to puzzle out how they reciprocally affect each other (Abrahams, 1977).

7. That the group that maintains the rhetoric benefits by the exercise of hegemony over the players, over their competitors, or over those who are excluded from the play. This postulate makes explicit why the present approach to play centers on the rhetorics of the theorists rather than, more simply, on the narratives they tell themselves. Rhetorics are narratives that have the intent to persuade because there is some kind of gain for those who are successful in their persuasion. Telling plausible stories would not be enough.

8. That the way in which the scholarly disciplines define the subject matter of play may or may not make sense in terms of the rhetorics that are being proposed in this work. This is open to investigation. Three kinds of play definitions will be considered where they are available:

(a) The definitions by players of their own *play experiences* and functions. What do the players reckon to be the character of and the reasons for their own participation? Obviously there is not much research to be referred to here, although there is a considerable amount of anecdotal opinion to be cited. It is useful to discover that there can be—and often is—very little relationship between the players' own play definitions and those of the theorists.

(b) The definitions by theorists of *intrinsic play functions*. These are definitions drawn from the research literature, or new ones arising out of the present analysis, that are supposed to account scientifically for the play's functioning by pointing to the players' game-related motives for playing.

(c) The definitions by the theorists of *extrinsic play functions*, which account for the forms of play in terms of functions they are supposed to serve in the larger culture.

It is with the two last types of definitions (b and c) that this study is preoccupied. It is quite possible, for example, for players to have one rhetoric while "experts" have another. But it is also possible for experts to use one rhetoric when talking about the players' responses and another rhetoric when discussing theoretically what they think is the underlying function of the forms of play. A description of the players' enjoyments, after all, need not be the same

as an account of the supposed adaptive functions of those enjoyments. More important, finding the relationship between accounts of play in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic functions is yet another way of talking about the interplay of play and nonplay. There is promise here of some clarification of the causalities of play and life.

As a final point of each chapter, it will be necessary to return to the issue of play's ambiguity, with which this work begins. My aim is to establish to what extent ambiguity is an outcome of the seven rhetorics, or if it must instead be attributed to the character of play itself.

Note

1. Play-related quotations here and throughout the rest of this work are, for the most part, from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992) Playful quotes, noted as "after" are of fictional status. Dr. Frech is frivolous.