
Play Theory

A Personal Journey and New Thoughts



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A preeminent play-theory scholar reviews a lifetime devoted to the study of play in a lively, even playful, recounting of his illustrious career and some of its autobiographical roots. The author covers the development of his three major theories of play—as a viability variable, as culturally relative play forms, and as a co-evolutionary multiplex of functions—and points to some new areas of inquiry on the topic.

SINCE I FIRST BEGAN REFLECTING on the nature of play and games in 1942, I have authored or coauthored, edited, or coedited, fifty books or so on these subjects. And during those sixty-five (and some) years, I thought time and again I had at last discovered the meaning of play. But, somehow, it always turned out otherwise, somehow there always seemed other questions to ask, other lines of inquiry to follow, all auguring answers more promising than those I thought I had in hand. Something about the nature of play itself frustrates fixed meaning. And so this account, despite my years in the field, turns out to be more a preliminary inquiry than a final resolution of my thinking, a setting sail again rather than a coming to port.¹

Because there have been many departures since the original voyage I undertook in the middle of the last century, in this article I want to share with you some of my intellectual adventures on these numerous ludic fishing expeditions. I'm fully aware, by the way, that the Latin word *ludic* denotes semblance and deception (although these days scholars tend to use it simply to sound more scholarly). I know, too, there is the danger on this first-person voyage of seeming merely ludicrous. But what if that is precisely what the study of play itself turns out to require?

In any case, come sail with me through a life spent fishing the waters of play theory. Perhaps this time, together, we can finally land some idea of what play truly means, an idea large enough that we don't have to toss it back before, yet

again, we cast a new line. Let me open with a snapshot of my relatively brief academic career in New Zealand, where I took my academic degrees and did my first research, before I tacked off to England and the United States to become a young Marco Polo of play.

The New Zealand Initiation

The first time I remember thinking about the nature of play rather than simply engaging in play itself was one afternoon when the parents of my high-school girl friend, Ruth Whitaker, asked me what it was like to grow up in New Zealand. They were British and recent arrivals, with the curiosity of immigrants about their new home; I was fifteen at the time, and I jumped on the opportunity they afforded me to revel in my boyhood and boast about the escapades of my youth.

We, my friends and I, lived in Island Bay, which was a seaside suburb south of the city of Wellington. Off the coast a picturesque little island sat out in the middle of our bay, protected from us explorers by some pretty rough tides. We kept instead to the hills surrounding the bay, to Windy Wellington, where we leaned into the turbulence, which—when the wind blew full speed—could bring us to a standstill as we walked headlong against it.

From the tops of these hills, so we told ourselves, you could look east eight thousand miles at Chile or west a thousand miles at Australia. Away from the wind, under the endless rows of pine trees the Labor government planted during the economic depression of the 1930s, we occasionally disturbed lovers embracing on soft pine-needle beds. We sometimes swung on a rope above the prickly gorse and yelled out the name of the legendary kid who had fallen into the dense growth and—so the story went—died in the hospital where he was taken afterward. We looked for the cow dung found everywhere back then, when the hills were thick with farms. We stretched our hands wide across the dry top of the patty, then we flipped it over so we could smash the sloppy underside into each others' faces, a feat we more often dreamt of than accomplished. Perhaps most of all, we liked to creep into the deserted and (so we imagined) haunted house high on one of the more spectral rises. There, we tiptoed around, looking for ghosts we never found. But then they never found us either, to our relief and perhaps also to our disappointment.

In any case, these were the kinds of play I had at hand to describe my New

Zealand childhood for the immigrant parents of the exquisite Ruth, who passed so long ago from my life. Add to them the numerous adventures I shared with the group of boys who grew up with me in Island Bay's Waikato Street and you have the sort of feverish exploits modern play theorists came to call rough and tumble play. It's a kind of play difficult to idealize into something especially beneficial for those who engage in it, and therefore more generally neglected than dealt with in our age, except by such scholars as Peter K. Smith and Anthony Pellegrini. They have done their best to keep its study alive over the past fifty years, which can be rather easily verified simply by checking the list of their works in the bibliography of my book, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997).

It was the kind of play I first tried to write about after I decided to become a school teacher when my favorite instructor in the fifth form at Wellington Boys College told me I should go to Wellington Teachers College because T.C. students always had Wednesday afternoon off for sports. I wanted to capture the sense and feel of my own rough and tumble play in the matriculation essay for the university entrance exam, but I was failed for trying to do so by a buttoned-up judge who cared more for proper grammar than for my gritty subject. A year later, I passed the test by writing about matters more prissy, and I was indeed elevated to the teachers college, which lay only a small distance from Victoria University of Wellington, where I could take courses for a full university degree.

I signed up for the first such course in 1942—educational psychology. And the first paper we had to write called on us to evaluate the major, then-current theories of play. These theories held that play was driven by surplus energy or that play was a recapitulation of ancient practices or that it was instinctive or a relaxation or a preparation for real life. I tried to illustrate all these esoteric suppositions with examples from my personal rough and tumble past, and to my utter amazement the lecturer—a Professor Gould, an immigrant like the Whitakers, having recently arrived from Europe—gave my theoretical efforts a perfect score.

Through these two events—a talk with my girl-friend's parents and the converting of my earlier reportage on play into serious theoretical categories—play somehow ceased to be for me just something embedded in the sports I so robustly enjoyed. Play became as well a set of positive verbal images and representations and even fantasies. Play consisted of ideas, not just of actions; it became something inside my head, something subjective, something that forever afterward affected my existence in peculiar but positive ways. Just as

some scholars spend their lives consumed by the metaphysics of literature or history or philosophy or theology—you name it—I came to spend mine in search of the metaphysics of play.

Controversial Children's Stories

The impulse to use the rough and tumble play of my youth as a starting point for my thinking about play actually got me into some considerable trouble early in my career. When I taught a standard three class (ages eight to nine) as a final part of my teacher training in 1948, I discovered there were very few books by New Zealanders for children of that age. I began to write my own history about the play of a group of local boys (my brother, two friends, and me), which I read to my kids at the school in Brooklyn, a nearby suburb of Island Bay. I called the book simply *Our Street* and thought of it as whimsically realistic. It began:

Once upon a time there was a middle sized boy named Brian and he was called "Brin." Now there was nothing unusual in this because very few boys are called by their own name. Sometimes they are called "Snowy," and sometimes they are just called "Stinker," but they are hardly ever called what they really are. So Brian was quite an ordinary sort of boy.²

A rough and tumble aspect runs through *Our Street*, which is perhaps even more evident in a second book called *Smitty Does a Bunk* that I wrote some years later for ten- to eleven-year-old children. The story begins by celebrating the end of a school year:

CHAPTER ONE: OUT OF THE GATES OF MISERY

That afternoon everybody had run down the streets from the school crying and yelling and pushing each other and twisting some guys' arms and some guys' heads and pushing and twisting and running and yelling and jumping on backs and pulling their bags on their backs so that they fell backwards to the ground and jumping on their backs and giving them hammerlocks and Chinese-burns and punching their arms and giving them chocolate drops. "Want a chocolate?" and yelling and "Yoohoo," push and pull "See you next term maybe," "Hooray to the

drongoes,” “Shut your face,” “Aw bulldust to you McCrone,” “Yoohoo, boo-aah,” “Go take a running jump at yourself,” and yelling some more and some guys pretending to be mad and other guys getting madder and who wouldn’t be anyhow cause it was the end of the school term and they’d all got out at two o’clock which was a whole hour earlier than usual. And a big line of standard six kids came charging down the street with their arms around each others shoulders like Fish in the Net or Chain Tag, and a few other boys tried to catch on to the end of the line but had bags to carry in their other hand so they couldn’t which was a bit tough for them. And everybody was yelling at the top of their voices:

*Two more weeks and we shall be
Out of the gates of misery
No more writing. No more French
No more sitting on a hard board bench
No more walking two by two
Like the monkeys in the zoo
No more spelling no more books
No more teachers dirty looks*

Which was a bit silly cause they were out of the gates of misery right then, not just in two weeks. But who cares. They sung it just the same.³

My *Our Street* stories invoked from the children an excitement about their own story writing, an excitement they had not voiced previously. These children were reading for the first time about kids like themselves, kids who used the same slang they used, who played the same games they played, who shared the same excitements and similar personal experiences. One of these children told me fifty years later:

For my child generation your book changed the whole nature of our personal understanding of books. Most of our prior readings were about British children with all the concerns with social status that those books usually contained and which were foreign to typical Kiwi community life.⁴

One of my friends, a liberal named Ray Chapman Taylor, who lived just down the street from me, and a famous old educator, who went by the name of Coombs (just Coombs), both suggested that I should submit these chapters to the government's School Publications Branch, which published monthly journal readings for each of the elementary school grade levels. When my stories began to appear as a series in these official school journals in July 1949, there was an immediate public outcry against them.

Some of the criticism came from the locally elected authorities on the regional Education Boards. Some came from members of the Headmasters' Association for New Zealand's primary schools. These folks complained about the slang and the grammatical deficiencies they saw in the stories. Members of the opposition party in parliament also criticized the stories, contending that the Labor Party then in power approved the kind of antisocial behavior portrayed in these readings for school children.

Members of the Labor Party responded in support of the stories, arguing they were New Zealand's answer to the tales of, say, Mark Twain or Charles Dickens. As a result of the public brouhaha, the monthly school journal ceased to publish *Our Street* after the first three chapters. But the heated discussion, which much occupied the newspapers of the day, led—perhaps not so surprisingly—to *Our Street* being published as a book in 1950. And I later wrote two sequels, both children's books, one the aforementioned *Smitty Does a Bunk* (1961) and the other entitled *The Cobbers* (1976). The major effect the fuss had on me, perhaps, was that I came to spend the rest of my scholarly life defensively. I always seemed to be reaching beyond my own personal narrative to capture supportive historical and psychological truths about play. One might say that for all my life I have been unconsciously, if enjoyably, attempting to validate the nature of child play and searching for a universal theory of play itself.

Playground and Game Studies

By 1949, then, my attempts to write stories about my own play had developed into an interest in children's play in general. I tried to tell myself that such an interest did not conflict with my research on reading disability for my 1947 MA in educational psychology, not least because I had received a New Zealand-wide university award for the research. But I did not really believe the two went

together, and I came to admit that, despite its clearly practical importance, my reading research was the most boring task I had ever undertaken (except perhaps for the three monotonous months I spent between 1942 and 1943 training in the Territorial Army for the war in Egypt against the great German tank commander Erwin Rommel).

In any case, in 1949 I applied for a university PhD research grant to study the play and games of New Zealand children. I received the grant, one of the first of its kind, and I spent the years from 1949 to 1951 working on (as the title of my thesis had it) “The historical and psychological significance of the unorganized games of New Zealand primary school children.” It turned out to be a massive, nine-hundred-page work. I passed the three years constantly observing playtime at my local Island Bay school, and I conducted similar research at thirty-five other schools throughout the country. I rode with itinerant physical education teachers, sometimes sleeping in their freezing cars overnight, and then visiting their classrooms the next day with my handy questionnaires. I received reports from many hundreds of people in response to the national publicity campaign I organized, badgering newspapers and journals and radio stations to run information about my venture.

As a result of all of this work, I received a Fulbright Scholarship to the United States in 1952. On the way there, I took a detour to Great Britain to give my first-ever academic lecture to the British Folklore Society at its annual meeting in Belfast. There the president, Lady Lake Barnet, interrupted my speech and told me to stop mumbling and speak more clearly. (That was embarrassing enough, but something similar happened after I arrived in America. I was lecturing to a class, when the chairman of the department also told me to speak more slowly. It was the infamous New Zealander’s sheepish mumble! Later, John Loy—the play research colleague of whom I became most fond—suggested wryly that I would be better called not by the name of Sutton-Smith but rather Mutton-Smith. In future years, I would always speak very slowly to my classes for the first five minutes to get everybody listening clearly, then take off!)

On the 1952 visit, I also met and befriended the great folklorist Peter Opie in a London pub, and we both declared we would write our next book on games. Eventually we both did so, but the difference was this: *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, which Peter and his wife Iona published in 1959, caused a great stir especially among those interested in worldwide communication theory; my book, *The Games of New Zealand Children*, published by the University of California–Berkeley Press, also in 1959, landed with a resounding thud in the academic

remainder bin. I fared better with romance. Shirley Hicks, who had gone with me to England, stayed behind to teach in London while I went on to the United States. However, before I left, I bought her a small, affordable engagement ring.

For nine months I reviewed the play research at Berkeley, where scholars beginning back in the 1920s had conducted the first longitudinal research study of child development. I did not get much out of the data, though in later years, scholars found that those in the study's sample who became most successful as adults had been involved in more forms of play as adolescents than those who fared less well. From California I traveled to the University of Chicago, where I was attracted by the sociological game studies of the famous David Riesman. While I was there I met the controversial psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, who threw me out of my first class with him because, in my ignorance, I had failed to register for it properly. A little later at a cocktail party at the Riesman's, Bettelheim spoke very kindly to me, as if I was another person entirely from the one he had earlier that day ordered to leave his classroom.

But most usefully in America, I spent a year at Wayne State University in Detroit working with psychiatrist Fritz Redl, famous for his investigation of child anger. He headed a research study that looked at the character of play in the behavior of children whom the schools of Michigan would no longer accept. The study took place at a very exciting summer camp called Hell, Michigan, where trained researchers trailed the targeted disruptive children and desperately tried to observe them while climbing trees with them or paddling off with them in canoes. We researchers sometimes even rode on the backs of our subjects' bicycles in order to keep our observations going. At one point, I had to put my observational research materials aside in order to stop a fight between two children going at it with their oars as we all nearly tumbled into the water. The idea was to contrast the play of these children with the play of more normal children whom we followed about later back in the suburbs. From our findings we produced a series of "One Boy's Day" descriptions, and I've got to say, my play research was never again so hazardous.

The best part of the American trip personally, however, came before Chicago or Detroit, when I was still in Berkeley. I realized that with the money I had just received from a Smith-Mundt graduate grant I had funds sufficient to bring Shirley to the United States. She came by boat to New York and by bus to Reno, Nevada, where we could marry without waiting a week for the blood tests we would have had to wait for in California. She arrived in Reno at 2:00 a.m., and we were married at 11:00 a.m. in an Episcopal church. The minister

gave us a lecture on the seriousness of marriage, which we heeded faithfully for fifty years of a marriage that ended when Shirley died of hepatitis C in 2002.

Finishing Up in New Zealand

While I was overseas, back in New Zealand my doctoral examining committee was struggling over a decision about my dissertation, which I had submitted to them in 1952. I had assumed everything was going well enough because my external examiner, a professor at the University of London, kept referring to me as Dr. S-S. I was wrong. At length I discovered that my committee chairman in New Zealand seriously objected to my including the disgusting jokes and rhymes that I had discovered elementary school children whispered to each other and had recorded for use in my thesis. The chairman argued that if the country's regional Education Boards saw my research, they would not only object to university research focusing on such childhood filth, but might well in the future forbid the university from conducting any research at all in the schools. He also hated my references to Freud and insisted that if I persisted in using psychoanalytic interpretations, I should assign them to an appendix.

I remember particularly that he objected to my description of a game in which one boy opens a cigarette tin in front of other children and secretly shows them a horrible, iodine-colored finger resting on a bandage, whispering as he did so, "My father cut my finger off!" At which other children were supposed to recoil in horror, though he was actually sticking his perfectly healthy finger up a hole in the bottom of the can. For my part I enjoyed entertaining the possibility that this was folklore evidence for Freud's theory of childhood castration anxiety. My chairman, however, was not amused.

In 1953, when we were still in the United States, I received notification that the dirty rhymes were to be removed and that the dirty Freud was to be confined to the appendix or the thesis would be rejected. It took us a while to get the changes made—my wife retyped it all—and send the revision back from the United States. Thus a thesis I began in 1949 was not finally accepted until 1954, though I recently discovered it was nevertheless the first-ever educational psychology PhD in New Zealand history. This only became clear to me in 2007 when some New Zealand university authorities asked me if I would mind having my name attached to an annual prize for the best doctoral research in educational psychology. They said they wanted to inspire more research in education. Naturally I said yes.

But that's not the end of the story. On my return from the United States in 1954, I became involved in helping the special education authorities set up summer camps for New Zealand children, who—like those involved the United States studies—needed therapeutic help. I was excited by the prospect of carrying on such research while at the same time continuing with my teaching. I wrote several internal departmental accounts of how a camp at Glenelg in Canterbury should proceed, and I helped find the most suitable personnel for the task. It was my good fortune that my father, the chief postmaster of Wellington and the master of the Health Stamp Fund for malnourished children, was able in those more plush postwar times to release that facility to serve as a camp for psychoneurotic children of all kinds.

I asked the special education department to give me school leave so I could oversee the research about the progress in play during this kind of camp therapy. I was at that time teaching in a country school. Located ten miles from the nearest town, a place called Masterton, the school put twenty-five children from age five to fifteen all into the same classroom. The name of the school was Mikimiki, which was apparently the name of a spiritual route in native Maori beliefs.

My wife, also a trained teacher, could easily have taken over during my absence of several weeks. Indeed, she had already done so during the initial stage of the camp preparations. Mysteriously, I was told by the New Zealand education ministry's director—the famous Dr. C. E. Beeby—that the local Education Board (one of those again!) would not grant me the leave, regardless of the fact the very same group had already granted leave earlier for me to set up for the very same summer camp program. But that, so said Dr. Beeby, was all there was to it. Many years later, I heard that Beeby's office objected to my further participation because I might be too candid in public about the character and results of the study, as I had been too candid in the *Our Street* fuss. Thus the department might once again have a parliamentary hazard on its hands.

Frankly up to that time, I had engaged in the naive and patriotic dream that I could continue as the only elementary school teacher in New Zealand with a PhD in educational psychology and that I could at the same time also be a researcher at the school. The dream was liquidated by the department's decision to cut me out of the project I had started. Immediately after learning about the decision, I phoned Professor Harold Jones, director of the Human Development Program at Berkeley, who had read my thesis back in 1952 and encouraged me to return to United States. Within a month, Shirley and I and our first two children—Katherine (born in Detroit, Michigan) and Mark (born

while at Masterton, New Zealand)—were on our way to Bowling Green State University in Ohio, where I was to become a professor in the psychology department and take charge of teaching developmental psychology to the students from the school of education.

I have to confess, however, that the bureaucratic foolishness of the school authorities in New Zealand wasn't the only reason for my eager return to the United States, even if stupidity did help negate some the patriotism I naturally felt for my native land. Shirley and I had had a great two-year honeymoon the first time we were in the United States, and we loved the place. So we returned eagerly in 1956 to the country where I was to spend the rest of my life as a play-oriented university professor, to study a subject with which I am still engaged, though now I have long retired from university life.

My First Play Theory—Play As a Viability Variable

One of the great private joys of my life comes from the fact that I could take the racy children's rhymes and cruel jokes the members of my dissertation committee forced me to expunge from my PhD thesis and turn their intention on its head when I arrived at Bowling Green. I immediately started to investigate what these childish things meant as play behavior. Since the beginning of my career, I had found my greatest support among folklorists all over the world who had long been studying and recording the folk games of children—as exemplified by Lady A. B. Gomme in her remarkable volumes, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1894). Knowing such work, I did not hesitate to send my own students out to collect, naively enough, what lay basically just in front of them.

With the help of those students, in 1958 we collected 155 jokes from local schools throughout northwest Ohio, jokes which we dubbed a variety of names—Cruel Jokes, Bloody Marys, Hate Jokes, Ivy League Jokes, Sadist Jokes, Gruesomes, Grimsels, Sick Jokes, Meanie Jokes, and the Comedy of Horrors. The details of this inquiry were published in the journal *Midwestern Folklore* in 1960. Here are some examples:

Murder:

Mommy, why are we out in a boat at night
Shut up and tie the cement block around your leg.

Cannibalism:

Oh ma, I hate grandma's guts
Shut up and eat what's put in front of you.

Corpses:

Johnny if you don't stop playing with your little sister
I will have to close the casket.

Beasts:

Mama, what's a werewolf?
Shut up and comb your face.

Excrement:

Dad it's dark down here
Shut up or I'll flush it again.

Indifference to the young:

But mother I don't want to go to Europe
Shut up and get into the care package.⁵

There are many other topics in which similar comments are made about degenerate parents, afflictions, diseases, and even religion (Happy Easter Jesus). While these jokes are malodorous, they also take place as informal contests of verbal play to see who can bring up the worst sentiment. But the question at hand is what can these kinds of jokes tell us about the meaning of play? At the very least, they suggest that for the children who take part in the jokery, there need be no limit to the shocks they can include in this kind of unorthodox play—so long as they make them funny.

Other leading play theorists have conceptualized this labile, intentionally contrary aspect of play by using such terms to describe it as flexible, divergent thinking, subjunctivity, anarchism, pure (impure?) assimilation, desire, indeterminism, psychic masochism, dark play, inversion, hidden transcripts, subversion, mockery, willfulness, illicit play, cruel play, masks, festival hazing, disorderly, exaggerative, irrational powers, grievance syndromes, and grotesque realism.

But which of these multifarious terms offers the best description for this kind of behavior? Nearly all of our 155 examples were some type of attack or at least evidenced disrespect for conventional behavior or conventional thought

or good manners. A similar kind of stark, narrative representational freedom can be found in the naively realistic stories children often make up. I have written about these in *The Folkstories of Children* (1981). These were collected from preschool and school children who we told to make up their own stories. For over three years at Teachers College of Columbia University, New York, eighteen students and I collected over five hundred stories. Below are a few typical ones taken from preschool and school children aged two, three, four, and seven years, which many educators traditionally presume to be a very early age for such chaotic tendencies.

ALICE, AGE TWO YEARS:

The cookie was in my nose
The cat went on the car
The fireman's hat went on the bucket
The cookie went on the fireman's hat
The cookie went on the carousel
The cookie went on the puzzle
The cat went on the cakie
The cookie went on the doggie

ERZA, AGE THREE YEARS:

And then a scooter came and runned me over
And then a train came and picked me up
And then I was dead
Then a record came and spinned me off
Then a kitty cat came and said "wake up wake up"
Then I waked up
And then Patty came and picked me up
And then I was sick
And then Kelly came
And then the bell
And the house
And then the umping [*sic*] came and picked me up and throwed me
Last night there was a monster
And then a fat man came and picked me up
And then he put me in his shoe
And then he had a sweeper and sweeped me

And then he blowed in the wind
And then he went like that [he opens and shuts his mouth several
times]
And then he took a funny story
And that was all

INGBERT, AGE FOUR YEARS:

The dragon was ferocious enough to jump on buildings
And burn them without burning them
And after he burned them without burning them
He would step on the buildings
And the buildings would break in two
Once there was a ferocious dragon
This is what would happen [he shows the bottom of his shoe]
Yucky old yucky, yucky candy
Then after the yucky yucky old candy got on the buildings
The dragon went poop on the buildings
And then the poop splatted
And then the father that lived in the building
Went on the roof and he got his shoes all yucky
And then he came in and then he washed his shoes off in the bath
And after he washed his shoes off in the bath
The poop went down the toilet
The next time he took a bath he put his head under the faucet
Little drips of dump went down little holes in his eyes
He took a shampoo after all the dump splatted in his eyes
And after the dump went down his eyes he died
And that is the end.

JIM, AGE SEVEN YEARS:

Once there was two babies and they hung from the ceiling naked and
their weenies was so long their mother needed 300 and 20 rooms to fit
half of it in. But they had to chop half of it off. And the baby had to go
to the bathroom. So since they didn't have no bathroom big enough
for his weener to fit, so he put his weener out of the window and Nixon
happened to be walking along and he said "Flying hot dogs, I never
heard of it." And then he said, "Well I might have one. It looks good."

So the baby had to go to the bathroom and Nixon took a BIG BITE. And there was a trampoline because he was in a circus, and he went through the ceiling. And then by accident he went so fast and he was holding on to his weener so hard that he went straight smack into the middle of the ocean. And then—all of a sudden—he was a giant sea spider. And his hair standed straight up. And the baby was coming so fast he landed on Nixon's head and made the long straight-up hair into bushy curls. And then he went, "I'm going to get out of here real quick, man." And, um, and then the baby saw this giant anchor and he was holding onto it. And then Nixon went so fast under the water, he went like a torpedo. And he stretched the baby's weener so far that it was four thousand times the size. . . .⁶

Now if we put these New York children's stories from 1981 together with the jokes from Ohio in 1959, we again find that young kids display a freedom to make the world contrary in almost anyway they wish. It seems as if they are waging a war of sheer originality against conventional commonsense and righteousness. Many of these examples of jokes or stories would strike their parents or their teachers as offensive. In effect, these tales implicitly constitute a rebellious expression. Already at these early ages, children are implying that play allows them to overcome the stuffy and bossy adult world they encounter.

Most adults innocently reviewing this material will probably respond emotionally with disgust or shock or even anger. I am reminded of Freud's argument that play is always an abreaction against such conflicted emotion, which makes play as such for him a form of therapy. As Freud might see it, perhaps, children are protecting themselves against varying hegemonic physical and human realities by making fun of them with these relatively obnoxious representations. There is a kind of courageous parody here. Some have suggested that for these reasons play may be thought of as a kind of grievance syndrome, one which transcends the grievance by its own absurd and funny character. Such suggestions led me to regard play as at heart always a kind of transcendence.

I remember that my own favorite solitary play as an imaginative form concerned *King Kong*, a movie which hit the theaters in 1933 when I was eight years old. I played endlessly, building walls out of toy blocks for my Plasticine Kong to attack while the natives—who had pins for their spears—stuck their weapons into the giant beast. And, as Freud would surely have noticed, Fay

Wray was completely absent from my fantasy scenario, which would only confirm the psychoanalyst's sexual latency theory about midchildhood. As I look back, I suppose that my interest in this power struggle had something to do with being the son of a strong father.

And maybe, too, it had to do with having a stronger brother, four years older than I, who endlessly punched me in the shoulder to demonstrate the points he made verbally. Still, whatever he did, he could not cut off my lifeline of private, solitary play. Furthermore, he unwittingly turned me into a cheeky child always mouthing some fresh repartee, a habit that plagued my subsequent social life at all levels. If I couldn't overcome him physically I could at least taunt him with words.

Theoretically speaking, in this kind of ludic disaster, play might be said to transcend emotionally the miseries of the world and allow escape into these happier, private versions of that world, often conjured with cognitive—even if disgusting—originality. One can also look at all other kinds of games (casino games, sports events, festivals), as well as at all of the play in the arts (music, dance, theater, literature), and see that in all of them the world is a more exciting place in which to live for a player or spectator, at least for a time.

In my first twenty or so years of study, I had defined play primarily by this excitement within a person's own spontaneity. But in later years, I came to realize, based on the data I was collecting, that play is not just fun, not just pleasurable for its own sake. Play's positive pleasure typically transfers to our feelings about the rest of our everyday existence and makes it possible to live more fully in the world, no matter how boring or painful or even dangerous ordinary reality might seem. It appears to me that in this way play genetically refreshes or fructifies our other, more general, being.

Contrasting play with sex is telling. Sex, like play, may be pleasurable for its own sake, but it nevertheless serves an evolutionary purpose through childbirth. Play is also a pleasure for its own sake, but its genetic gift is perhaps the sense that life, temporarily at least, is worth living. Play we might conceptualize as what I came to call a viability variable, one supplied as a genetically based technique that allows us to triumph over regular, ordinary distresses and disasters or, more simply, to feel good about life in general. Perhaps as birth is the evolutionary salute to sex, a general feeling of viability is the evolutionary salute to play. Just as sex, though fun, can also create birth, so, too, can play, which is also fun, create a lively viability. Thus do both fulfill their evolutionary tasks.

Folklore and Psychology

From the time I began investigating children's jokes at Bowling Green, I became, privately at least, mostly a folklorist, though publicly I remained a developmental psychologist concerned with the changing structures of individual play. And as a folklorist, I was basically involved with the description and histories and structures of the traditional forms of games and play. Thus as mentioned, I published *The Games of New Zealand Children* in 1959. Subsequently, I gradually shifted my focus to the rest of the world and ultimately included mankind in general as an object of my theorizing about play, producing with Elliot M. Avedon *The Study of Games* in 1971. Then, in 1972, came *The Folkgames of Children*. In 1976, I identified some twenty-three relatively famous play-related books that were out of print and edited them for republication by Arno Press. These new editions were marketed to libraries to bring their holdings on the subject of play up to date. My later folklore-related works were *A History of Children's Play: New Zealand, 1840–1850* (1981), *The Folkstories of Children* with David M. Abrams and others (1981), and *Children's Folklore: A Source Book* with Jay Mechling, Thomas W. Johnson, and Felicia R. McMahan (1995).

In general, my folklore work in these years tried to describe the way games had changed through time or varied across cultures. Aside from the folklore study, I was getting paid to teach how children developed psychologically through their play and game structures. The two disciplines—psychology and folklore—were in conflict, and I suffered from a kind of professional cognitive dissonance. I remember one of my best folklore students at Pennsylvania protesting to me that she didn't care about all these psychological developments in play. What was important to her were the aesthetics of folk play. At that time, I was president of the Psychology of Aesthetics Division of the American Psychological Association, so her complaint was particularly disturbing to me because she was right. My folklore studies resembled an intellectual hobby, even though my folklore work involved other scholars—in particular Mechling and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett—and I began a children's section of the American Folklore Society, initiated a journal of children's folklore, and in 1994 received a Life Achievement Award from the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society.

But from 1956 to 1994 during my university teaching years, I was for all practical purposes directly involved in psychology. I began, as I mentioned, as a professor in charge of the psychology undergraduate program at Bowling Green, where I mumbled through my last years lecturing six-hundred students about

developmental psychology in the university's concert hall. In 1967 I transferred to New York to become a professor and, until 1977, director of the program in developmental psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. Finally, I became head of the Graduate Program in Human Development as well as a professor in folklore at the University of Pennsylvania between 1978 and 1994, a position which at last recognized the interdisciplinary quality of my lifelong study of play and brought the dissonance to an end.⁷

The more immediate psychological focus of my work was reflected over the years in the other books I wrote or coauthored or edited—in treatises such as *The Sibling* (1970) and *Sex and Identity* (1972), both written with clinical psychologist Benjamin G. Rosenberg. I owed a great deal to Ben during my early years in Ohio. You might say I learned from him how to publish in psychology in order not to perish. And publish I did: I produced two psychology textbooks, *Child Psychology* (1973) and *Readings in Child Psychology* (1973), then *Sibling Relationships: Their Nature and Significance across the Lifespan* with Michael E. Lamb (1982). During the same period, my focus on play within the field of psychology was evident in such works as *Child's Play* with R. E. Heron (1972); *How to Play with Your Children (and When Not To)* with my wife Shirley Sutton-Smith (1974); *Play and Learning*, which I edited in 1979; *The Masks of Play* with Diana Kelly-Byrne (1984); *Toys as Culture* (1986); *Play and Intervention* with Joop Hellendoorn and Rimmert van der Kooij (1994); and finally *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997).

This sixty-year record of books and articles, not to mention all the speeches and papers I presented, raises the central question of this retrospective: Just what did I think I was doing in so hungry a pursuit for the meanings of play?

Reckoning with Piaget

I do remember in the 1960s, before the great developmental cognitive theorist Jean Piaget made his way into my consciousness, I felt with some satisfaction that I had the issue of the combined nature of children's and adult play pretty much all to myself. I was in no special hurry to flesh out a complete theory because I thought very few others gave a damn about understanding the way play stretched across all age groups. Then, in the mid-1960s in the United States, the work of Piaget began to appear, describing child's play as a form of cognition and adding cachet to the study of play even among cognitive theorists.

I was not all that taken with Piaget's theories. In defense of what I had begun to call play's variability, I criticized his thinking as it was presented in "Piaget on Play: A Critique," an article appearing in *Psychological Review* in 1966.⁸ I reckoned Piaget's writings were yet another distraction from a more important focus on play itself—play as an existential, separately motivated reality, rather than as Piaget's scrim on cognitive development. I cared less about contemplating how the stages of play paralleled such development than I did about investigating the notion that adults as well as children are always engaged in one play form or another, either simple or complex. It seemed to me, Piaget ignored the key issue, which was what a child's make-believe, a mother's crossword puzzles, and a father's endless rounds of golf had in common as forms of play.

The most unfortunate consequence of Piaget's rationalization of children's imagination was that it served to make the imaginative function and the play function become confused in much modern, rationalistic, prochildhood thought about play. As everybody points out, Kant was the major proponent of the imagination as necessary for human thinking. Empiricism, he said, was not adequate alone to provide hypotheses. His positive view of the imagination consequently became a fundamental plank in the intellectual platform of historical enlightenment, and it had recently helped generate a more positive view of play. But Kant also said that overindulgence in excessive fancifulness can degenerate into a deadly poison. In short, the imagination and the playful imagination are not the same thing in his thinking.

Play doesn't just consider possibilities in some rationalistic way, as many modern interpreters like to believe. Play is instead preoccupied with grievances and with distortions and with social status more than it is with mathematical probabilities. There are not merely *Finite and Infinite Games* as the title of James Carse's 1986 book suggests. Indeed considerable evidence shows that in collective societies, the play hierarchies of the male children become new political alignments when and if male parents are killed while away hunting. Consider the recent example of the Lost Boys of Sudan, driven from their homes and societies in Sudan in the 1990s and now living in the United States. Here the way they continue to represent and integrate themselves as adults matches the play representations of the adult male musical world of their much earlier Di'dinga childhood years.⁹

All of which means, once again, that play always serves some general cultural motivation. Notions of the imagination as pure flexibility or pure rationality might be relevant for artists and scientists, given their truly creative

imaginations. But these notions are not necessarily so for the imaginative play of children, which is more heedless, more focussed on having fun, more concerned with the realities children face, realities that are important and even threatening to them.

My Second Play Theory— Culturally Relative Play Forms (Teasing)

In America, as my ideas about the rough and tumble child's play matured, my family grew. At Bowling Green, my wife and I added two more girls—Leslie and Mary—to our Katherine and Mark; altogether we made up quite a full house. Then Emily came ten years behind the others after we moved to New York. It was there that a journalist named Ben Patrusky dropped by Columbia to ask the new head of the Department of Developmental Psychology what he knew about play. I suggested he help himself to the file of one hundred or so articles I had so far written about play. He spent a few days in my office making his way through them, after which he concluded I should write a popular book on the topic.

As an academic, I had never thought much about doing such a thing, but I soon warmed to the idea though I worried that whatever I produced would be far too abstract for a general reading public. So Shirley offered to translate my writing into a more common idiom and to add certain topics she said I essentially left out of my thinking, such as how to play at cooking. (One great measure of her success is that now, fifty years later, my son, in addition to being a computer hotshot, cooks beautifully for his wife and two daughters.) Below are some of our recommendations about how to get your infant to smile and laugh in those first six months. You can find them in *How to Play with Your Children (and When Not To)*, which we wrote in 1974. These are some of the contemporary examples we provide of teasing, a habit characteristic of many modern parents during just the very first year of their child's life:

- making clown faces at the baby
- making gross or babbling noises in the baby's face
- blowing raspberries on the baby's body
- pedaling the babies legs
- poking out a tongue at the baby

putting a finger in the baby's mouth
mock chewing the baby's hand
throwing the baby in the air
jumping the baby up and down on the bed
tickling the baby's body
falling over so that the baby laughs
bouncing the baby on the knee
letting the baby pull your hair
hanging the baby upside down by the ankles
playing games, such as holding one baby finger after the other and
chanting:

*This little piggy went to market,
This little piggy stayed home,
This little piggy had Kentucky Fried Chicken (or whatever!),
This little piggy had none,
And this little piggy went wee wee wee,
All the way home*

(concludes by tickling the baby's arm towards the armpit)¹⁰

So what type of play are we talking about, and how does it work? Note there are surprises here just as there were in the Play as a Viability Variable theory, although the surprises there were mock disgraceful, whereas here they are mock positive.

Generally, our claim was that all of these emotional surprises increase a baby's flexibility and—more importantly—that a parent's empathy with the baby increases the baby's empathy for the parent. Such play takes both to a higher level as a family who knows how to have mutual fun and how to enjoy each other more. There is cross-cultural evidence that societies employing these playful parent-child relationships in the first few years of a child's life create kids who are friendlier and happier in their relations to other children.¹¹ This implies that mutual novelty play can bring parents and children closer together in general. In short, the play experience transfers to other social relationships, so we can say that some kinds of play increase the positive socialization of children. From the evolutionary perspective I introduced earlier, teasing is fun in order to serve play's social function.

Cultural Frames and Playful Mimicries

Apart from my growing attention to our parent-child relationships, while I was at Columbia I began to examine the cultural bases for play. In New Zealand, I had published my first anthropological article while I was still writing my thesis. Entitled “The Meeting of Maori and European Cultures: Its Effect upon the Unorganized Games of Maori Children,” the article showed that—despite what the New Zealand *Pēkehā*, or white people, generally believed—Maori games of *koreru* (otherwise know as knucklebones or jacks) were closer to games played in Southeast Asia than to those found in the United Kingdom.¹² Not surprisingly, when I got to New York in the 1970s, I was attracted to the work of John M. Roberts, a scholar at Cornell University investigating the worldwide cultural contexts of games of strategy, chance, and physical skill.

Roberts’s findings derived their data from the Human Relationships Anthropological Files, which anthropologists had developed during World War II to make available to military strategists and policy makers information about cultural behavior of people in varying parts of the world. Roberts and his colleagues found in analyzing several hundred of these distinct culture summaries that, first, games of strategy tended to exist in more complex cultures and, second, a more positive attitude toward games of chance tended to accompany more positive religious feelings.

When we arrived with our four kids to spend a summer with Professor Roberts at Cornell, I persuaded him to consider in his study an analysis of the child-rearing techniques found in those cultures. He did so and this time found that games of strategy were related also to higher obedience training, games of chance also to greater responsibility involvement (i.e., drudgery), and games of skill also to achievement training. These findings clearly suggested that the content of the games borrowed much of their meanings—whether those meanings involved notions of complexity, religion, or competitiveness—from their cultural context. The thesis found historical support in the famous Dutch historian Johan H. Huizinga’s epochal book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949), where he suggested that the cultural complexity of game rules anticipated the legal and civic complexity of the civilizations where they developed.

As one result of these findings, Roberts and I were invited to a play symposium before the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Germany. I attended, speaking for both of us, and the trip produced a continuing relationship between myself

and the Sports Institute of the University of Tübingen. Its director, Professor Ommo Grupe, invited me back for several years thereafter to spend several days lecturing on play to interested professors. Grupe wanted his colleagues to realize that sport was not the only form of play. They would hear me out in English, then go off together and discuss in German what I'd said, then return with their barrage of questions in English. This back-and-forth process went on for several years and led to my book *Die Dialektik des Spiels* (1978), in which I applied the Hegelian and Marxian dialectical thesis-antithesis-synthesis to play. The name of the book was in part my weak joke about the local focus on dialectics, partly a wry comment on the process of give-and-take with my German audience, and partly recognition that it is useful—as we will see later—to analyze group play forms in these terms. (I now prefer to use my invented word *dialudic* for a game's antithetical complexities instead of the historically derived, ideologically charged, philosophical paradigm called dialectics.)

I also was responsible for introducing into Germany the New Games Movement, a phrase I picked up from my friend Bernard DeKoven, one of the major creators of that movement and author of *The Well Played Game: A Player's Philosophy* (1978). I was interviewed on television and afterwards on occasion even found myself sitting down opposite Prince Philip, the husband of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh, took me for an Australian and therefore confided in me all his many anti-British, pro-German sentiments when it comes to the efficacy of sports organizations. Prince Philip was accompanied by two blond beauties, one on each arm, to serve as his guides, so perhaps he was more inclined at the moment to favor the Teutonic side of the royal family.

I had the most productive decade of my life at Columbia University during the 1970s, writing four times as many books and articles as I had during the 1960s or 1980s. Academic and artistic life in New York City deserves much of the credit. One was always obviously on some sort of creative front line in New York. My wife Shirley was also a painter, a quilter, and a choral singer of some note. I personally carried out research projects on children's film making and their dramatic gifts. Also, I joined with others to launch a new society dedicated to the consideration of play. Known initially as The Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, it later shortened its name to The Association for the Study of Play (TASP).

I was president for a year, and afterward suffered through the only roast the society ever held. It was a raucous affair, with the well-prepared speakers

sometimes aiming the kind of polished obscenities at me typical of such events, to which I responded with some cheeky language of my own. I found the whole thing hilarious, as did most of the audience, but the occasionally blue nature of the evening led some of our more sensitive or conventional members to resign from the society.

Since then I have received three, less controversially conducted *festschriften* celebrating *my* scholarship, two from an anthropological association and the other from a group of developmental psychologists. More recently, I was invited to lecture in Belgium for the five-hundredth anniversary of the University of Leuven. There I talked mostly about the great fifteenth-century Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel, whose paintings included numerous games. As a result, Roland Renson, a professor at the university's School of Physical Education, began sponsoring new theses on the subject, and I served as a visiting professor there for some years. (I also occasionally lectured in Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Holland, France, Yugoslavia, Mauritius, and—more recently—Spain and the U.K. [i.e., York and Wales].)

In any case, during that ever-so-productive decade of the 1970s, I also received several awards for my research on toys. I first took up toys early in the decade when the American toy companies had come under attack for the purported racism and sexism of their products. The manufacturers did not know what their toys “meant”—in other words, they lacked the basic social science necessary even to understand the charges, much less to answer them. So they asked me, who did understand the social and cultural import of toys, to travel around at their expense and tell folks about toys.

I did a few television tours, met all kinds of famous characters, spent early mornings in innumerable green rooms with movie stars and politicians of every ilk, and then went on air to discuss with talk-show hosts how toys—apart from their simulative value—were a form of economic training and socialization for contemporary children. I pointed out again and again, in the modern western world, unlike in traditional collective societies, we work in large measure alone at our desks using our imaginations. And solitary play with toys helps acculturate us to such a world. These tours and some investigations funded by various research grants culminated in *Toys as Culture* (1986), which some proclaimed as the first look at the subject from the perspective of the social sciences.

With all this as background, we can now return to the analysis of teasing. This time, however, we can see it more clearly in cultural terms.

Teasing As Culture

Jean L. Briggs probably gives us the most thorough accounts about the role of teasing play during child rearing in her books *Inuit Morality Play* (1998) and *Never in Anger* (1970). In both works she describes the teasing play of the Inuit Eskimo tribes of Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada, detailing how some Inuit adults dramatically play with two- to four-year-old children. The parent—or sometimes another adult—poses a difficult, perilous, or novel question.

Are you still a baby?
Is your mother good?
Are you good?
Do you want to come and live with me?
Why don't you kill your baby brother?
Why don't you die so I can have your nice new shirt?
Your mother's going to die. Look, she cut her finger. Do you want to
 come and live with me?
Are you loveable? Are you really?
No, you're not. You're no good.¹³

The adults, playfully exaggerating, at first ask these negative questions intrusively, aggressively, loudly. They then employ these perilous teasings repeatedly in a paradoxically good-humored and playful way. Using teasing, they aim to wean their children from infantile attitudes and encourage them to accept the prevailing (and, in this case, unspoken) quietist survival values of the group. These public values include emotional reserve and appropriate “cool” behavior in interactions with other children, adults, and strangers. The Inuit generally forbid the open expression of anger and sadness within the family. And these emotions are not supposed to exist at all in the larger community. (Some outside investigators, however, have voiced skepticism about these points.) The teasing aims to teach children behaviors that show respect but not fear towards others and that caution them regarding dangerous people and animals. The relationship between such survival or shock play and the environmental and social contexts of the Inuit seems clear. Their nomadic and ice-bound lifestyle requires intense cooperation. In these tribes, survival depends upon constant collaborative work, shared beliefs, and social coordination.

The paradox is that the Inuit respond to shock in their own lives by provoking it in their children, thereby gradually teaching them to avoid being shocked. Notably, they don't begin the training until after the first two years of loving contact. But the infant play is clearly a form of socialization. It is fun but at a price.

To date, Judy S. DeLoache and Alma Gottlieb have conducted the only other study examining a similar number of cross-cultural contrasts of the role of socialization in the playful teasing with infants. In *A World of Babies* (2000), the authors bring together anthropological information about teasing as it relates to child rearing in six of the world's older societies: the Ifaluks of Micronesia; the Muslims of Turkey; the Fulani of Africa; the Balinese of Indonesia; the Warlpiri of Australia; and the Beng of Africa. For each society, the authors develop a hypothetical, modern, Benjamin Spock-like child-rearing manual, supposedly based on what they have derived from the group anthropologically. In other words, they self-consciously provide us with a kind of Dr. Spock interpretation for each of these cultures.

Let me summarize their data on teasing. Two of these six societies—the Ifaluks of the Caroline Islands in Micronesia and a village of Muslims in central Anatolia in West Turkey—avoid teasing altogether. Instead, they practice considerable gentleness with infants. For the Fulani of West Africa, teasing exists but has no relationship with child play. Instead, a group of adults directs insults and teasing toward the new mother. This teasing, the authors say, is something that a competent mother must tolerate if she expects to learn all she needs to know from the others. At the same time, the mother tries to avoid referring to her baby in positive terms and wishes to prevent others from doing the same, as this behavior could make her child vulnerable to theft by witches. The Fulani commonly roll a child in cow dung to fool greedy spirits into thinking that the child is not worth taking. Additionally, a Fulani mother occasionally insults her child to see that it accepts the authority of adults. In turn, Fulanis encourage children to insult even younger children, thereby conserving the social hierarchy of elders over beginners. While this negativity might verge on play in the hands of adults or children, we have no evidence of that.

The remaining three societies, however, do show signs of teasing in a playful fashion. The Balinese of Indonesia, who, with their emphasis on personal emotional control as valuable behavior, seem to tease their children so that they learn to maintain composure in the face of shocking stimuli (a behavior not unlike that of the Inuit). One of their parental techniques involves children of

about two years old. Parents borrow a younger baby from another family and play with it so that their own baby becomes intensely jealous. DeLoache and Gottlieb offer the following practical advice in light of this practice:

Your young child will experience strong emotions and may throw tantrums. Your job is to help him or her learn how to remain calm even in the face of upsetting situations. . . . Play with the baby, or even let the baby nurse from your breasts, while your child watches. Of course, this will make your own child feel jealous, and a tantrum may ensue. Don't become angry or punish the child—indeed, don't react strongly at all. This will encourage your son or daughter to find a way to deal with the natural feelings of jealousy. Then, the next time you “borrow” a baby, your child may react more calmly and may even play with the little one. Be sure to convey how proud you are of this new appropriate behavior. . . . If you use strategies like this one, by the age of three or four your child will have developed equanimity in the face of provocations, disappointments, or frustrations.¹⁴

Here the shock of this play with another by the mother becomes a kind of morality tale and a rather hard form of shock play for the child. In a sense, the baby remains bereft until he or she finally accepts that the mother is only playing with the other baby and that the baby is not taking his or her place. In this case, teasing is a clear-cut, if playful, instrument of socialization, instigating shock in the child that he or she must overcome in order to be accepted. Most importantly, the play is a useful way to gain a child's obedience to these cultural codes of behavioral equanimity. The parents use such “weaning” play, therefore, to satisfy their desire for their own child's appropriate socialization.

The Walpiri society lays modest claim to a more positive kind of shock as play. These aboriginals in the northern territories of Australia tease their babies by imitating baby talk until they are about five years old. This behavior aims to preserve the child's infancy because the parents claim their children are still too young to speak properly. This teasing fits into the adults' more general joking and teasing of each other, to which the children become accustomed and, in due course, replicate amongst themselves. Rather than being simply a technique of socialization by the adult, these behaviors illustrate more clearly a general shared teasing play form between child and adult.

The most striking and playful teasers (to us adults anyway) come from the

Ivory Coast African society of the Beng. There parents teach their children to insult their grandparents as a way of making the children feel free and familiar with these older relatives, thereby encouraging close and loving ties between babies and their grandparents. The Beng reach a level of highly enjoyable shock play unparalleled among the other groups, but let me point out that the play, however enjoyable, has again been converted into a form of socialization. As DeLoache and Gottlieb say of the Beng:

After learning to greet politely, the next thing your baby must learn is how to tease certain relatives by tossing dirty names at them. Anyone your little one calls Grandma and Grandpa—not just your parents and your husband’s parents, but all their sisters and brothers as well—will tease your baby son by calling him jokingly, ‘Shit prick!’ ‘Red prick!’ ‘Raw shit scrotum!’ or your daughter, ‘Shit cunt!’ ‘Black cunt!’ ‘Tiny cunt!’ Your child will soon learn that this is all in good fun and you should teach the little one to engage in the repartee by laughingly shouting back dirty insults. There is nothing cuter than a one-and-a-half-year-old shrieking out with delight, ‘You red balls!’ to her doddering grandfather or, “You black asshole!” to his old grandmother. Later when you become much stricter with your children, it will be a comfort to them to have such a relaxed and teasing relationship with their grandparents. They may even seek refuge with them if you chastise or punish them too severely one day.¹⁵

DeLoache and Gottlieb’s several case studies demonstrate that, throughout the course of childhood, these complex events allow play and reality socialization to penetrate each other in a variety of ways. Play is not simply separated from reality by the meta-communication that, “This is play,” as Gregory Bateson, philosopher, anthropologist, and naturalist has pointed out. The present teasing play event rather begins as one reality for the child (shock) and ends as another reality for the adult (socialization).¹⁶

Such a process might seem relatively unimportant except that we find it replicated in today’s schools in what is called curriculum play. Some claim that curriculum play routines instigate and support higher levels of literacy, narrative control, reciprocal perspective taking, and so on. The same kind of transformation also occurs in organized sports play, where children are directly coached in the skill and morality of their sporting tasks. Adults deploy coaching

rhetoric to offset the threat that comes along with the difficulties of acquiring the relevant skills. Even in their own play, children often mimic real sports and acquire some vestige of sporting skill.

For example, I remember—as I recorded in *Our Street*—we invented a game of kicking through the rugby uprights at the local park. You had to kick from the spot at which the ball arrived when kicked by one of the other players. You got three points for a drop kick, two for a place kick, and one for a punt. This went on endlessly, but it paid off years later, when I got to be captain of the second rugby team in my primary school, and the only points we scored in the one match we played that year were the three points of my penalty drop kick. We lost the game, but I nevertheless became famous locally for the kick and went on playing right through high school till I finally got my cap for being in the first fifteen. It was my moment of primeval glory, and the cap still hangs on my wall.

The practical similarity between the uses of play in the past—teasing—and in the present—curriculum and sports play—suggests that we should look again and skeptically at the modern notion of play as a realm of solitary imaginative freedom, autonomy, and nonfunctionality. Our teasing examples indicate that in earlier cultures at least play was much less a world of freedom but also less a world of neglect than we imagine it today. Indeed, this cross-cultural data about extended family teasing collectives indicate that in spite of our modern conceptions of play, adult-oriented child play was actually quite as prevalent in the ancient world as it is in our contemporary society. And, ironically, many modern, politically correct adults would probably prefer these kinds of adult-coached play to their children's own autonomous and fantastic creations.

Modern evidence of the battle over contemporary play coaching comes from the United Kingdom's Playwork Program. This is a government-subsidized, after-school-hours, day-care program employing university-trained play teachers to look after the children of working couples. At present the play workers, who believe that the out-of-school time should be used for building children's learning skills, are waging an ideological war against those who feel that the after-school hours should be spent in free play time. These latter point to, say, modern Adventure Playgrounds, where children can use their imagination to bring innovative play apparatus to life. What most amazes me, however, is this: all over England, you can now get a bachelor's degree in play. I have lectured to two of these warring groups, one in Leeds and the other in Wales, in 2006 and 2007, respectively. Their intense focus on—and excitement over—the various

kinds of play, and on which is appropriate at what level of childhood, very much gratifies me.

Regardless of the outcome of this ideological struggle, it seems clear to me that teasing—which after all was our point of departure here—offers several ways for children to struggle with the dangers of society through parent-guided play representations. These teasing plays are an extraordinary adaptation to the perils of survival, endowing both parents and children with a higher kind of mutual social integration. As sociologist Émile Durkheim might have said, the play is a unique, formulated reality in that it both symbolizes and supports the cohesion between parents and children as they face life's threatening events. The adult-oriented play we have lately been discussing helps better integrate children into complicated societies than does, say, everyday solitary play. Our conclusion is that teasing is an initiation, a form of play that helps a child deal with being shocked, a form of play aimed at aiding parents in socializing of their children. Most importantly, teasing is a form of play that represents a higher symbolic state of cultural integration for both parents and children, just as Durkheim would have it in his time-tested and still-tenable hypothesis.¹⁷

The question then arises whether all social play has such cooperative underpinnings in addition to the character-building benefits it offers individual players. (In the case of teasing, an example might be the teaching of resilience.) Looked at in a certain light, we might see in the studies I have mentioned examples of a sociobiological collaboration between altruism (cooperation by parents with children) and selfishness (resilience by the children), rather than a struggle between the two, which has been the drift of some arguments by reductive sociobiological theorists.

In other words, our examples of teasing suggest not merely the existence of a selfish gene, but of socially functional, cooperative genes. Indeed, there are many mundane examples among humans and other animals of cofunctional cooperation within species, whether that purpose is served by altruism, by selfishness, or by prudence. (Whenever we drive an auto and follow the laws, for example, we engage in such prudential cooperation.) While the teasings I have discussed may have a genetic basis—in, say, the stimulus exchanges of parent and child—they also involve varied socializations and psychological attributes. These together—to get ahead of myself a little—create the kind of teasing I include in the concept of coevolutionary functioning, which I develop below as one example of what Peter A. Corning would call the coevolutionary synergies in his *Holistic Darwinism: Synergy, Cybernetics, and the Bioeconomics of Evolution* (2005).

I have been discussing teasing in relation to the adult socialization of play (and some of the cross-cultural variables of teasing that are important to my interpretation of play) as if my wife and I knew exactly what we were up to when we first began teasing our kids. But of course we never suspected we were involved in the socialization of our children. We teased them because it was fun. It was fun to interact with them, to see them laugh or fret for a moment, and then to laugh with them. But while we were playing these games with our own children in the 1950s and 1960s, the evidence was mounting all around us in developmental psychological literature that such stimulation of children—fun or not—correlated with cognitive success in nursery school. At the time, experts were uncertain whether this meant play was the causal antecedent of such cognitive development or whether there was simply underlying parent-child correlation in intelligence and playful predisposition.

To complicate matters, the last fifty years have witnessed unprecedented levels in western culture of media-child stimulation through newspapers, radio, television, video games, computers, the Internet, mass-produced toys and games, cell phones, and the like. These media supplements have made it increasingly common for parents to socialize their children into this intense and varied stimulation, which parents themselves now experience. Thus, although new forms of play today surely constitute a method of socialization, they might be more specifically a means to habituate infants and young children to the high cognitive energy levels and the personal informalities increasingly valued in the modern, consumer-information-oriented world. Not surprisingly, in a civilization that spends so much on entertainment, the ability playfully to join or lead the entertainment of others has become a valued and direct form of adaptation. We might consider this ability in adults as a metaplay function because it involves professionally playing with play.

All of which makes clear just how ambiguous play can be. Play is both autonomous and heteronomous in varying degrees, depending on the kinds of play. One cannot simply define play in terms of its representational content. One must also know the cultural context in which the play under consideration takes place in order to evaluate its character, which I might add was a major theme of *The Ambiguity of Play*. But I've come to believe it now possible to get beyond these complexities with a discussion about play as a more evolutionary concept, a discussion of the cooperative interlay of genetics and culture to be found within the varied forms of play.

New Thoughts about Play Theory in Retirement

Up until 1990 when I retired, I had been embroiled in the professional pluralisms of academic life. In my last years, for example, I was a director of the Human Relations Program, but I was also the chairman for our Graduate School of Education. I spent far too much time in faculty meetings, arranged in part I believe because I brought a sense of play—mostly verbal lightness—to these occasions and, whenever possible, helped prevent the dean from losing his temper. I also headed the tenure committee, which was hard work in the spring semester. But worse than that, it meant wrestling with the question of who got tenure, always a grim business because of the devastating impact its denial has on someone's life. I used to meet regularly with my great colleague Erling E. Boe, associate dean and professor, at his place for martinis on Monday nights to plot the course of campus joy and tragedy.

Then, all of a sudden, came retirement, which left me with only my research to worry over and think about, except for a bit of world travel with my wife on various boats and barges. At last I had time to think things through more to my satisfaction, which has resulted in—how shall I say—“thicker” books like *The Ambiguity of Play* and a volume yet to come, tentatively entitled, “Play as Emotional Survival.” The first of these I had told Harvard Press in 1990 would be finished in a year or so, but it came out some seven years later. As for the later work, I am not seeking a publisher until I am sure the time has come to bury the case. I have actually finished the work twice and then unraveled it in the light of further information. In addition, play, all of a sudden, has become among other things a sociopolitical matter of some complexity, and I want to consider the role of such a phenomenon in the marketplace as well as in the playpen.

None of which stops me from sharing some of my preliminary thinking with you now.

My Third Play Theory—Play as a Coevolutionary Multiplex of Functions

In making the case for my first two play theories, I have emphasized their fun, their viability, and their cultural relativities. But much more is required for a complete analysis of the many varied play forms.

In *The Ambiguity of Play*, I focussed on what I called the rhetorics of play. Essentially these had derived from my twenty-year membership in The Association for the Study of Play, because the organization included many kinds of academics—anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, zoologists, philosophers, artists, and biologists, among others. In my early dealings with these diverse scholars, I arrogantly decided that most of them did not know what they were talking about. Ultimately I realized this was my problem—the bias of an ill-informed psychologist—not theirs. Their scholarship was often outstanding, and gradually I understood that each discipline had its own notions about play, different notions from mine, notions with which in due course I had to come to terms. Thus I formulated the seven rhetorics of play.

In brief, I believed that, when most of these scholars talked about play, they fundamentally presupposed it to be either a form of progress, an exercise in power, a reliance on fate, a claim for identity, a form of frivolity, an issue of the imagination, or a manifestation of personal experience. My argument held that play was ambiguous, and the evidence for that ambiguity lay in these quite different scholarly ways of viewing play. Further, over the years it became clear to me that much of play was by itself—in its very nature, we might say—intentionally ambiguous (as, for example, is teasing) regardless of these seven general cultural frames.

Since I wrote *The Ambiguity of Play*, it has become even more obvious to me that the cultural-frame approach to play constitutes only one layer of an evolutionary multiplex of ludic functions. Decades of research into mammal and primate evolution and into the origins of language have recently shown that each of my ludic systems has multiple characteristics across a variety of relevant functional domains. There are next to no simple causes or processes to account for the characteristics of these evolutionary functions. The two theories of play I've already discussed—voluntariness and viability, my first and second theories—may for certain be frequently characteristic of play, but they are absent from some play forms.

After all, there is much of the involuntary about frequently conforming to the wants of others in social play. And the aftermaths of play experiences are not always positive, as I discovered long ago in Windy Wellington. So, like the 135 or so play concepts listed in the *Ambiguity of Play*, my first and second theories account for only some of the variance in many forms of play. They are all true for some forms of play and some aspects of play, but not for all of

them. As a step towards a more comprehensive third theory of play, then, I have outlined below a hypothesis to account for the relevant multiple layers of play and their potential integration.

Adaptive Layer 1—Evolutionary Conflict Origins of Play

There are several kinds of speculation about the origins of play:

- (a) The first holds that play originates as a mutation and therefore an amelioration of dangerous adaptational conflicts. According to John Allman in *Evolving Brains*, this play mutation constitutes a pre-existing genetic function.¹⁸
- (b) Some scholars claim the most fundamental conflict arises between dangerous and mutually threatening opponents. In studies of such conflicts, 80 percent of the time creatures from ants to mammals actually engaged in defensive rituals or simply retired from the field of battle.¹⁹
- (c) Over time these defensive rituals have increasingly incorporated what we might call imitative representations both as a way of emulating serious conflicts and as a way to avoid engaging in them. Richard Schechner in *Performance Studies* gives us a multitude of cross-cultural examples of relationships between ritual performances and play.²⁰
- (d) Gordon Burghardt asserts in *The Genesis of Animal Play* that mammals as a class of animal—one that survived the extinction of dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago—characteristically protected their young by developing play stimulation to replace other, more dangerous stimulations from which mammals now shielded their infants.²¹

Obviously all of these interpretations can hold true at the same time.

Adaptive Layer 2—Reflexive and Reflective

To refine this conflict-reduction paradigm a little, it seems possible to me that even sixty-five million years ago, mammals adapted not only by using their ancient reflexive responses but also by using reflective responses, those which gave them time to consider their alternatives. In other words, they could think before they acted as well as act instantly.

The danger for them—and this would be true for early humans—was that they might choose the wrong alternative, thinking before they acted rather than acting instinctively, which given certain conditions could mean instant death. So over time mammals developed a third response, which we call play, that imitated conflict but removed its immediate dangers and reduced the tensions that accompany such conflict. This play also had the potential benefit of providing exercise of a kind that might subsequently help when real conflict occurred. Animal play theorists suggest something similar perhaps when they talk about how play has developed as a negative behavioral signal in creatures without language or without the ability to otherwise signal negation.

Adaptive Layer 3—The Duality of Primary and Secondary Emotions

If we accept the assumption that play emerges as an imitative mediation of the reflexive-reflective adaptive duality, then it should follow that the nature of play can be described as a dynamic duality of contending forces, that is as dialudic.

The most ancient reflexive level implies immediate and often irrational expressions and actions, while the later reflective responses imply efforts at moderation not unlike those traditional in play—rituals, rules, and referees. Perhaps some neurological support for the existence of such a duality lies in the combative interactions between the ancient amygdala region of the hypothalamus and the more modern prefrontal cortex of the brain.²²

We can find more immediate evidence of the duality, however, in the relationships between the primary and secondary emotions as they manifest themselves within various forms of play. Some argue, for example, primary emotions exist that provide the motivations for various types of play. According to Antonio Damasio in *Descartes' Error*, these primary emotions—located in the amygdala—are shock, anger, fear, disgust, sadness, and happiness.²³

These expressive emotions appear central to particular types of play—shock (or surprise) is a major motivation in teasing and hazing; anger is a major motivation in physical or mental contests; fear is a major motivation in risk taking, whether physical as in many kinds of sport or mental as in games of chance; disgust is a major motivation in the play forms that use profanity; sadness is a major motivation behind many festivals; and happiness is a major motivation in all of the above forms of play.

With the second side of our duality come the rules, traditions, and referees for the control of the emotions connected with expressive play, which are in turn motivated by emotions of their own. These can all apply to all of the above play

forms. The major controlling motive remains, of course, happiness, but this is supplemented by such positive, rule-related emotions as pride, empathy, and envy and by the more controlling negative emotions such as embarrassment, guilt, and shame. If the Darwinian concept of the struggle for survival indeed finds a place in play, it is probably and most appropriately related to the urgency of the primary and secondary emotions.

Adaptive Layer 4—The Duality of Play Performances

Within play itself these emotions find their direct expression in the dualities that surround the performances of the players. Teasers and hazers harass their subjects, and competitors attack each other. But those who prevail against the harassment and attacks overcome the anger that motivates them with resilience and vigilance, enabling them to come to terms with the complexity of the situation and mount the best defense. Those filled with fear at the enormity of their own risk taking find the courage to stay focussed and ignore the fear long enough to complete the challenge they have set for themselves. Arrogant players sometimes disgust spectators with their iconoclasm but often make their unorthodoxies ultimately acceptable with their wit and their humor. Sad, lonely people get caught up in the exuberances of the private parties or public festivals they attend and act uncharacteristically friendly and joyful. The bored or apathetic escape their subjective funks in play experiences at the local movie houses, theaters, sports arenas, gyms, playgrounds, casinos, you name it. This is play being valued in ontological terms. One wins or loses but most importantly one feels differently about oneself, somehow more fulfilled, perhaps more accomplished.

Adaptive Layer 5—Dualistic Cultural Scripts

We have gone from genetics, to affects, to performances, but finally we have to concede the cultural relativity of much of the above discourse, since each of its levels arises from cultural processes, processes which in turn dictate the script for these representations of play.

Teasing and hazing, for example, are more typical of cultures where real initiation rites ensure the difficulty of joining important social groups. Similarly, contests tend to take place more often in societies concerned with various kinds of competitive resolution to their problems, societies that value hunting and warfare, societies where criminals and entrepreneurs abound. Games of chance and risk taking occur in societies that evidence strong belief in the power of the spiritual figures of their mythologies, whether these are beliefs, say, in a

magnificently infinite God or a more mundane Lady Luck. Iconoclastic play is often found in societies where conflicts rage over orthodox belief and behavior. Finally, plays valued for their subjective, experiential qualities (play in which one flows, for example, or is in the zone, or simply has vivid feelings) express societies like our own—modern, individualistic, consumer societies. The first play theory I discussed, which emphasized the viability of play in its after-effects, would for example be included in this ontological category. Play has worth, we said, if it projects feelings of satisfaction into the post-play world.

In sum, the representations and functioning of any of these forms of expressive-regulative mediation, which we call play, are characterized by dualities that are genetic, affective, performative, experiential, and culturally relative.

Just as we saw a duality in the emotions related to play—a duality reflected in neurology and in biological adaptations—we show a duality in performances connected to play. It is probable that within groups and within different social systems there are also binary relationships. Corning says of such dialudic parallels in his *Holistic Darwinism*, “the key to evolution is not any single prime mover but the entire suite of cooperative behavioral, cultural, and morphological inventions.”²⁴

The parallelism of these dualistic functions for Corning can be described as a synergy of synergies or—from our point of view—a duality (the dialudic) of dualities. Play is a complex phenomenon with many levels, and any acceptable theory of play needs to encompass all of them and account for their existence. Indeed, the neurological and evolutionary developments involved point to something more complex than Darwin’s notion of natural selection as the single driving force behind evolutionary change. To the contrary, the concept of natural selection may have biased us to favor unitary explanations and prevented us from appreciating just how complex these matters become. According to recent research by Douglas H. Erwin, evolutionary outcomes are likely also to depend on complex, functional, internal, and spontaneous neurological developments within the genes themselves.²⁵

Put more simply, play as we know it is primarily a fortification against the disabilities of life. It transcends life’s distresses and boredoms and, in general, allows the individual or the group to substitute their own enjoyable, fun-filled, theatrics for other representations of reality in a tacit attempt to feel that life is worth living. That is what we called earlier play viability. In many cases as well, play lets us exercise physical or mental or social adaptations that translate—directly or indirectly—into ordinary life adjustments.

All the theories peppering the play literature probably have some relevant grounding in this complex neurology and behavior. I listed some of the connections in *The Ambiguity of Play*, and I felt it would be rewarding when they all have been located and integrated in terms of cultural frames, specific games, emotional expressions, and performance dialudics.²⁶ But that lay in the future, and I believed the current account of the dualities remained too conceptual. I hoped to find it evident at some more contemporary and experiential level, which got me thinking how these dualities might appear among children just learning how to play by pretending.

The Infant Echo of Play's Dualities

In talk of evolution, we began with the mutation into play of the dangers of life by reflexive-reflective mammals. There might appear to be, at first blush, some biological equality between the reflexive and reflective responses, with neither leading especially to a more enhanced life or a more sudden death. Particularly from a human retrospective, we should probably give increasing weight to the reflective activity, since it resulted over time in the pluralistic societies, the multiple languages, and the increasingly rule-bound civilizations our games came to reflect. In my own research, I have found that the more complex societies have the most complex games, which are best symbolized, perhaps, by the complexities of games of strategy such as chess.

We should probably also presume that in cultural evolution these secondary and reflective affects gradually gained ground over the more instinctive primary emotions, though these latter might remain sufficiently troubling culturally to maintain their roles as representations in the games played. We have already discussed how the primary cortex (the reflective operations) constrained the instinctive amygdala (the reflexive operations) to produce acceptable rule boundaries. But which side of the duality, instinct or guile, should prove most essential for successes within the games themselves, seems to me a toss up, whether we discuss sports, chance, strategy, profanity, festivals, or cynosural performers. More important was that we envisioned play as essentially a mutation, a synthesis of this duality of emotional expression and emotional regulation.

But how is this synthesis learned in early childhood? If we look at the very beginnings of play in the first few years of life, we discover there is a hierarchy

in how children learn their own dualistic play. And here I quote from my old and dear, now-departed professor, Greta Fein:

1. At first the young children have to learn the immediate reality of the distinction of having or not having access to the internal pretence play arena. And this is where there are often great difficulties in being accepted by other players who are already in the play frame. But the play frame when negotiated provides immediate transcendence from the ordinary reality of not knowing how to share private meanings.
2. Then there is the nature of pretence or symbolic play which is blooming in the roles and enactments of those who have already gained access to the play frame. "Let's play houses" they might say or "Let's play circuses." In their now shared subjective worlds, ordinary social rules about people or life in general can be violated, sometimes with much player enjoyment at these violations.²⁷

William Corsaro's research demonstrates the first point quite well.²⁸ The second finds support above in my examples of story and joke play. But what may be most important in all of this is the benefit play affords each child, who gains confidence in a variety of these play pretence forms and thereby develops an inner, subjective life, a life that becomes the child's own relatively private possession.

Thus we venture that the earliest pretend play of two- to four-year-old children serves as the basis for their development of the duality of private and public that we adults take for granted. Adults know that the discrepancies between public and private are vital to our own lives and our thought. The sophisticated outcomes of acting discreetly about what we say publicly and what we think privately, for example, goes by the descriptions of having good manners or being socially intelligent or suppressing our laughter and impulses. On the other hand, of course, there exist some blundering people, inexperienced perhaps in certain kinds of childhood play, who cannot easily synthesize their public and private dualities, which often reveals itself in their obsessive, single-minded egoism.

Perhaps indeed this pretending or not pretending constituted the infantile subjective duality that, for example, was the basis for the greatest of all Shakespeare's characters, Hamlet, when he cried out in his anger and his pain that the central question was "to be or not to be." He saw his choice was to go on

suffering privately “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” or, instead, to take arms against his sea of troubles, which he was experiencing privately, and by opposing them, end them. In our case, we are supposing that the years of a child’s self-pretending could have provided him with the subjective confidence to affirm the inner self’s desires “to be” and to translate that desire appropriately into public consciousness.

I am suggesting that pretending or not pretending is an experiential duality, which in reflective evolution has now developed semantically beyond all the earlier, more confined evolutionary dualities I have discussed. Again more importantly, in the early years of childhood, these pretend ludic worlds will educate the players in the semantics of the subjective-objective duality destined to occupy their minds forever afterwards. In this way, children will learn through play in these early years that ordinary social objectivity is one obvious thing, their own personal subjective intentions and conclusions another, and that both are also relevant to their thoughts and to their beings. While the public rules of politeness and fairness in social situations will lay obvious claim to the children, their own minds will also adopt an internal and mostly hidden framework, a framework for their personal, secret, and usually private enjoyment. These early pretend games or pretend feelings or pretend morals can become a part of their personal, dualistic heartland forever.

In short, to put it bluntly, pretend play begins a child’s training in the social duplicities. What fascinates me here is the dualism in human thought between, on the one hand, the triad of reflexive responses to danger, ancient uncontrollable emotions, and the workings of the amygdala, and on the other hand, a child’s own private pretending that counteracts the power of these subjective drives with equally wild sources of autonomous energy. Yet remember that through play many of these counterpublic negatives are introduced into a civilization under the control of ludic regulations (rituals, rules, referees, and so on). Thus children who grow up with early access to this kind of play and who enjoy ludic support for the whimsy of their inner lives are likely to be more sophisticated in their mature social lives and more diplomatically adept in their everyday social relations.²⁹

All this is particularly true as these worlds of pretend meanings gradually take on the successive personal colorations of make believe, wishful thinking, day dreaming, primary processing, irony, allegories, bathos, parody, euphemism, innuendo, inversion, and various rhetorics. These early subjective pretences serve as a first training for the sophisticated semantics of the social

world, its multitude of languages, and its ubiquitous and varied media. Despite the opposition of the reading-writing-and-arithmetic Puritans with their no-child-left-behind “work ethic” programs, the contemporary world needs to be aware of the layers of ludic duality involved in forming the minds and mental health of the very young.

A New Zealand Epilogue

I was contacted not long ago by representatives of the recently established New Zealand Folklore Society (in particular Moira Smith) who have begun studying children’s playground rhymes. They sent me a paper that they are on the verge of publishing entitled “Continuity and Change: The Subversive World of New Zealand Children.” They report that recently their student groups have collected some eight-thousand rhymes. (Perhaps this is what happens when you neglect the subject for fifty years.) They summarize their findings this way: “Through the vehicle of playground games, children could safely mock those in authority or who held power over them, explore their developing sexuality and taboo subjects (farts, poos, and wees), and comment on future life passages and gender-based stereotypes.”

I include here the first rhymes they sent to me from their vast collection:

*On top of Mt. Egmont, all covered in sand
I shot my poor teacher, with a grey rubber band
I shot her with pleasure
I shot her with pride
I couldn’t have missed her
She was 40-feet wide.
I went to her funeral
I went to her grave
Some people threw flowers
I threw a grenade
Her coffin went up, her coffin went down
Her coffin went splat all over the ground
I looked in her coffin, she still wasn’t dead
So I got my bazooka and blew off her head.*

The only rhyme that I vaguely remember from my own extirpated collection back in 1953 is miserable by contrast to this one, but will do as a fitting whisper to my old, now long-dead, examining chairman and serve perhaps as a small reminder of what it was that attracted me to a lifelong search for the meanings of play:

*Ink, dink, pen and ink
I smell a great big stink
And it comes from
Y.O.U.*³⁰

I had planned to end here, which I found an amusing idea in keeping with the tone of this whole account. But then I suddenly remembered that I actually have a sort of Freudian-style tip-off to the real reason for the durable interest of the nature of play. Sometime in the midst of the controversy over *Our Street*, my mother—a somewhat shy and a nice person herself—said about the book: “But why did you only write about that kind of stuff.” She was implicating my brother as well. “You were such nice boys,” she said. This hit me like a bolt of lightning. Us? Nice boys? *Really?*

Maybe she was thinking of the time I got a prize for perfect attendance in Sunday School or the certificate I got for being the most improved boy in my last year at primary school—but *nice*? Who wanted to be just nice? For some time it puzzled me. I could only assume she was talking about our good manners, which I supposed my brother and I exhibited reasonably well most of the time. She certainly was not talking about our pranks in the hills of Windy Wellington.

Then it dawned on me that perhaps, just perhaps, the whole of my scholarly efforts for understanding play might have been in a sense my effort to show my mother that what she imagined was wrong about us in the book, all that rough and tumble play, was really OK. Perhaps I had spent a lifetime studying all this play stuff in effect to convince my long-dead mother we were really fine, absolutely normal, even when we were engaging in all that rough stuff. In short, I have been saying here and everywhere only this: nice boys are allowed to act quite horribly as long as they are playing. Or am I overestimating these psychological underpinnings of my desire to engage in the research and study of play? Perhaps they more likely triggered than sustained my lifelong voyage

of discovery. If so, that hardly changes my findings or diminishes the joy of the journey.

Play begins as a mutation of real conflicts and functions thusly forever afterwards. Play was always intended to serve a healing function whether for child or adult, making it more worthwhile to defy the depressing and dangerous aspects of life. Play is neurologically a reactive itch of the amygdala, one that responds to archetypal shock, anger, fear, disgust, and sadness. But play also includes a frontal-lobe counter, reaching for triumphant control and happiness and pride. Play begins as a major feature of mammalian evolution and remains as a major method of becoming reconciled with our being within our present universe. In this respect, play resembles both sex and religion, two other forms—however temporary or durable—of human salvation in our earthly box.

NOTES

1. Other autobiographical musings include "A Play Biography," *Children's Folklore Review* 20 (1997–98): 5–42; "A Memory of Games and Some Games of Memory," *Life and Story, Autobiographies for a Narrative Psychology*, ed. D. John Lee (1994), 115–42.
2. Brian Sutton-Smith, *Our Street* (1975, first published 1950), 7.
3. Brian Sutton-Smith, *Smitty Does A Bunk* (1975, first published 1961), 7–8.
4. The referenced student is former New Zealander John Wareham, leadership psychologist, lecturer, and author of numerous books, including *Secrets of a Corporate Headhunter* (1980), *The Anatomy of a Great Executive* (1991), and a novel, *Chancey on Top* (2003).
5. Brian Sutton-Smith, "The Cruel Joke Series," *Midwestern Folklore* 10 (1960), 11–18.
6. For these and more children's stories, see Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Folkstories of Children*, in collaboration with David M. Abrams and others (1981).
7. My visiting professorships included a year (1963) at Clark University, where Stanley Hall developed his recapitulation theory of play. And during that same time, my family and I vacationed in the Adirondacks, at the Putnam Camp, where early in the century Carl G. Jung and Sigmund Freud had visited and conferred. In Europe, I was a visiting professor and lecturer at the University of Tübingen's Sports Institute (1976; hence my 1978 book *Die Dialektik des Spiels*) and a visiting professor at the University of Leuven (1991). The latter is situated in the Flemish district, where, in the 1500s, artist Pieter Breughel created his famous masterpiece of children playing games.
8. *Psychological Review* 73 (1966), 104–10.
9. See Felicia R. McMahon, *Not Just Child's Play: Emerging Tradition and the Lost Boys of Sudan* (2007).

10. Brian Sutton-Smith, *How to Play with Your Children (and When Not To)* (1974), 253–57.
11. See Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, James E. Johnson, and Frank H. Hooper, eds., *Children's Play in Diverse Cultures* (1994).
12. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 60 (1951), 97–107.
13. Jean L. Briggs, *Inuit Morality Play: The Emotional Education of a Three-Year-Old* (1998); Jean L. Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (1970).
14. Judy S. DeLoache and Alma Gottlieb, *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Seven Societies* (2000), 115.
15. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
16. Gregory Bateson, *Steps of an Ecology of Mind* (2000), 178–82. See also *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (1972).
17. The most recent and excellent accounting of sociological views of play is Thomas S. Henricks, *Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression* (2006).
18. John Morgan Allman, *Evolving Brains* (1999).
19. See Susan E. Riechert, "Game Theory and Animal Contests," in *Game Theory and Animal Behavior*, ed. Lee Alan Dugetkin and Hudson Kern Reeve (1998), 64–93.
20. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (2002).
21. Gordon M. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (2005).
22. These neurological suggestions are derived from an appendix by Kelly Sutton Skinner in my forthcoming book *Play as Emotional Survival*. A leader in these neurological interpretations is Richard J. Davidson. See, for example, Kenneth Hugdahl and Richard J. Davidson, eds., *The Asymmetrical Brain* (2003); Richard J. Davidson and Paul Ekman, eds., *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions* (1994). See also *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama*, narrated by Daniel Goleman, with contributions by Richard J. Davidson, et al. (2003).
23. Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (2005), chap. 7.
24. Peter A. Corning, *Holistic Darwinism: Synergy, Cybernetics, and the Bioeconomics of Evolution* (2005), 43.
25. Douglas H. Erwin, "Darwin Still Rules, but Some Biologists Dream of a Paradigm Shift," *New York Times*, June 26, 2007.
26. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 219–20.
27. "Commentary," *Human Development*, 36 (1993), 247–52.
28. See William Corsaro, *Friendship and Peer Culture in the Early Years* (1985).
29. These issues will be dealt with in much more detail in my forthcoming book *Play as Emotional Survival*. An earlier form of this play account was presented in Brian Sutton-Smith, "Tertiary Emotions and Ludic Nature: The Ideologies of Human Nature," in Michael Kruger, *Menschenbilder im Sport* (2003), 262–78.
30. Michael Brown, Moira Smith, and Lydia Wevers showed me various chapters from their works in progress on New Zealand Folklore.