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Toward An Integrated Theory of Play

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

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2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Toward An Integrated Theory Of Play

by

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Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego

2016

Professor Steven Parish, Chair

This paper proposes a four-part schema for categorizing and analyzing meaningful acts with respect to their properties of consequentiality and stylization. Defined by these parameters, I suggest that we can analytically distinguish four distinct modes of meaning: play, game, work, and ritual. The salient attributes of each, but particularly the former two, are discussed, as well as the systemic relations of each to the other. Play is conceived primarily in terms of "going meta", a process by which humans exit the explicit systems of meaning in which they operate and open the terms

of that system for problematization. Game, conversely, is defined by a reverse operation in which arbitrary constraints are treated as binding and absolute within a bounded sphere. I conclude with an application of this construct to ethnographic material provided by Jean Briggs studies of Inuit pedagogical practices.

Introduction

“When I was a kid, we used to have this game called paperball.”

“Paperball? What’s that?”

“Take a piece of paper, ball it up, and... play with it.”

- Coolio, “I Remember”

Play is interesting for all the same reasons that it is frustrating and elusive. It is an omnipresent phenomenon not only cross-culturally, but throughout mammalian and many other forms of life. It is generally well-recognized for what it is in the moment- you know it when you see it, or better yet, feel it- but resists attempts at formal definition. It certainly has a basis in biology, but is inevitably expressed in socially and individually idiosyncratic fashions. It serves as the platform for a tremendous amount of more strictly economic, religious, or political activity, and in turn permeates all these other functions. And, despite the best efforts of researchers from a wide range of disciplines, it remains indissoluble to some other more primary category of behavior. Finally, most especially for the ethnographer, it has the infuriating quality of being almost impervious to any kind of exegesis. Ask a thousand people from anywhere you like, “Why is [x] fun?”, and a thousand times you’ll hear back: “It just *is*.” To the extent that the study of play has been marginalized in the social and human sciences, one suspects that it is first and foremost because of its stubborn resistance to ultimate functional analysis. The Western cultural construction of play as trivial and frivolous seems to have infiltrated the social sciences- it is difficult to understand, otherwise, why play has not achieved a standing as an elemental category of human life in the same manner as religion, kinship, and other familiar anthropological tropes.

The omission seems doubly serious when we consider the real importance of play to everyday life across this planet. Certainly, the leisure classes of the West have given recreation a level of intensity and potency that is perhaps somewhat unusual in the broad sweep of history. But even if this were a purely Western phenomenon (which it is certainly not) it would still demand our attention. Anywhere you look in our society today, from the classroom to the workplace to the bedroom, you will not look long before you see someone *trying to have fun*; surreptitiously or flamboyantly, fixatedly or distractedly, as passive consumer or active producer. For all that we speak of the “Protestant work ethic” in our society, economy and entrepreneurship do not have nearly the affective, motivational, and symbolic reach of play. It is, I think, so omnipresent as to be almost invisible. We do not speak of it because it is assumed- it is that which requires and affords no explanation. We’re all living for the weekend.

The difficulties in approaching such a broad, complex, and mercurial topic are not to be dismissed. The challenges of such a study are real and many. And so I offer the following disclaimer: the analysis to follow is thoroughly incomplete, biased, compromised, and otherwise insufficient to the task of answering the question, *What is play?* To attempt an ultimate answer to this question would be impossible to undertake in a playful spirit, and I believe I can do more to shed light on the question by playfully looking through a kaleidoscope of my own making. Kaleidoscopes distort, color, and fragment our perception, and it would not do to see through one at all times. And yet, they make certain things clear- they reveal the beauty and strangeness of everyday sights, and the wondrous and alien configurations they can achieve through a

simple trick of light. So, if you are willing to indulge in a little bit of silliness and confusion, I invite you to join me in looking through this particular kaleidoscope, and to make your own judgments on what we might see.

What's This For?

In the interests of transparency, I think it worthwhile to explain my own reasons for undertaking this project. Having been an avid player of games from an early age, I considered myself a “playful” person- ready and willing to become absorbed in imaginative worlds and undertake purposeless exploits. In my teenage years, when game-playing had become the centerpiece of a great deal of my social relationships, I began to notice a disconcerting pattern: those friends and acquaintances of mine who I considered to be the *most* playful were the same ones who were *least* interested in participating in formal games. By playful, I mean the personality types most apt to laugh and be laughable; the ones who were full of surprises and tricks, with the greatest facility for rearranging the givens of a scenario into outlandish new configurations. These inventive, spontaneous, *fun* sorts of people whom I admired and envied were the same ones who had little patience for the rules and repetitions of the sorts of games I enjoyed. This hunch became compounded by the many experiences to which any avid, “serious” player of games can attest: the always-present possibility that the game becomes an obstacle to its own putative purpose of “fun”, that the playing of the game becomes a laborious chore, or even worse, a cause for hostility, hurt feelings, and *real* competition in which there were actual winners and losers. In other words, in the playing of ostensibly trivial games, there was always an underlying potential for the logic of the game (to contest and win if possible) to overtake the logic of fun (to experience buoyant, inconsequential

engagement).

Eventually, these experiences crystallized into the notion that “play” and “game” were not only not synonymous, but in fact, *opposed* to one another in some respect. The patterns of behavior implicit in game-playing (which are repetitive/iterative, arbitrarily constrained, focused, and primarily consensual) seemed to have less and less to do with those evident in the make-believe of childhood, or the drunken revel, or other forms of activity which I had intuitively understood as “playful” (which are unconstrained, idiosyncratic, and prone to novelty). Something strange and unnerving was lurking in the background here- the sense that, perhaps, I was not as playful as I’d thought, that rather my pastimes were somehow mechanical, or fetishistic. Certainly there were times when I used games as a safer and more approachable means of interaction with individuals with whom I could not fully trust to a more informal, organic engagement. And yet, there was no mistaking the real sensations of excitement, absorption, and fun which accompanied my game-playing, when everything went well. So while both “games” and “play” remained somewhat reliable sources of “fun”, it seemed clear to me that they had less in common with each other than common sense would have us believe. The distinction I am posing here is essentially identical to that noted by Brian Sutton-Smith (1997: 148) between what he refers to as “play” and the “playful”. While we’re in agreement on the nature of the case, I find his terms semantically confusing, and so I phrase them instead as “play” and “game”, which frees the adjectival form of “playful” (and suggests “gameful” and “workful”) for other uses.

Once one has taken the step of opposing “play” to “game”, the more familiar opposition between “play” and “work” becomes opened for re-examination. Work, too, can very often be a great deal of fun. Building a tree-house is certainly work- it requires not only strenuous effort, but planning and routinization. For all that it resembles the mundane, laborious tasks which leisure-class subjects like myself spend their lives avoiding when possible, such work can be just as engaging, absorbing, and fun as any game. So, clearly, fun is not the defining characteristic of “play” or “game”, even if such activities have fun as their object. The effort to disentangle “play” from “game” from “work” led me to consider the possibility that it was not the socially-defined field of activity which made something “play”, nor the particular feelings or moods that might arise through that activity, but something else entirely. That “something” is related to *meaning*, and how meaning arises from the pragmatics of our activity. And in this respect, my efforts to achieve particular ends are meaningful in a very different way than my daydreams or sense of humor. The space of that difference is where I want to play.

Games and play clearly differ from work in terms of their *subjectively-perceived consequentiality*. Regardless of what real-world effects might arise from some act of gameplay, we enter into the game with the understanding that it is consequentially bounded- that, after the game, our lives will go on essentially unperturbed. This is not to say that games cannot or do not produce real effects- but these are not, normally, the reasons for which we play, and in fact which we tend to strenuously disavow. This stands in contrast to work activities, which are meaningful

precisely because of the manner in which they will influence the future course of our prospects. So *consequence* (again, subjectively perceived or anticipated) arises as a potential axis for understanding the difference between game and work; one which is not terribly surprising in terms of the common-sense rhetoric of play in the West.

But this fails to define the distinction I have posited between “play” and “game”- both disclaim themselves as inconsequential. What, then, distinguishes a game of chess from the play of making faces at an infant? I think the answer is to be found in one of many possible definitions of games (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 41): as a set of *arbitrary constraints* placed on a given action. If we agree that the goal of a game of chess is to move one of your pieces to the same location as the opponent’s King piece, then the rules of play appear as constraints on the straight-forward possibility of simply picking up a piece and placing it there. The game tells us that, to be “properly” played, pieces can *only* be moved at certain times and in certain fashions, irrespective of our physical capacity to do otherwise. And this is perfectly amenable to the understanding of games as inconsequential (which is, lest it need be said, not the same as unimportant); if the important thing about the game were truly that we capture the opponent’s King, every game of chess would devolve into a brawl as the players sought to grasp the piece at all costs. While in some respects that sounds pretty fun, it is not what makes the game of *chess*. And it is this constraint on means or method, which I would gloss as “style”, which differentiates games of chess from nonsense, cavorting, and the like, which I have termed “play”.

Work, on the other hand, is primarily defined by the absence of constraint on

method, and the primacy of consequence. In theory, at least (a point I'll return to momentarily), when we work, the *how* of it is secondary to the *what*. The sole constraint of a work activity (as an analytical ideal type) is the end to which it is directed, and any means we might employ to reach it is as good as another. So between the axes of style/arbitrary constraint/method vs. consequence/teleology, we can generate a four-part scheme for categorizing activity:

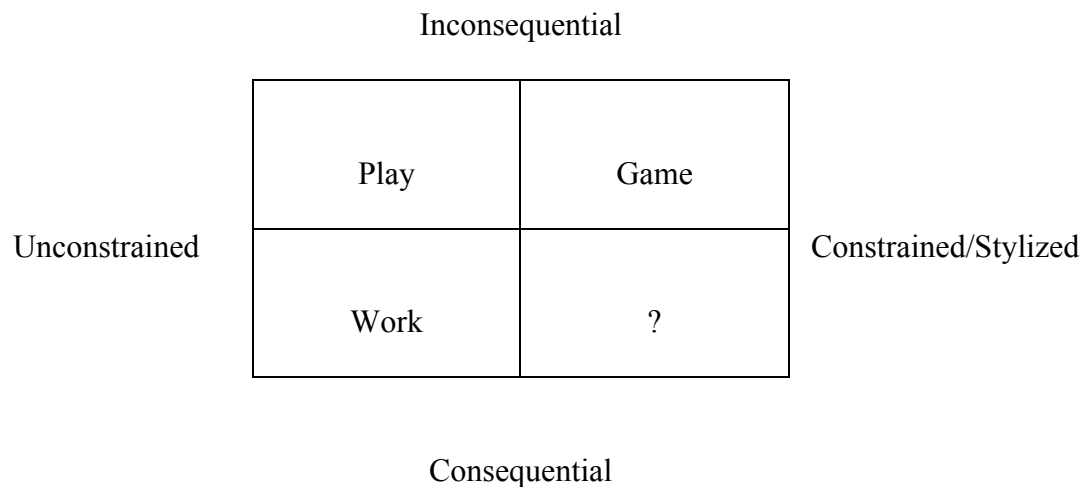


Figure 1. Scheme for consequence and style.

In this scheme, we're left with a fourth category- the stylized-but-consequential. I will posit that this field of activity can be termed "ritual", or something very like it. Ritual, when we free it from the definitional field which associates it purely with religious activity, can be thought of as activity in which *means* and *ends* are so tightly welded together as to be inseparable- as Bateson puts it, "the metaphor that is meant" (1972:183). The true-believing, orthodox Catholic understands that there is no substitute or workaround for the presence of an ordained

priest in the performance of confession; not simply because that isn't "how it's done", but because *there is no other conceivable way* to do it. One might confess to a friend, or Buddhist monk, and do so with as great of sincerity as possible, but doing so will not expiate his sins. The outcome of the action- salvation- is inherently and inextricably part and parcel of the manner in which it is done. A fuller account of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this work, but the point I wish to make now is that looking at human activity through the two prisms of style and consequence yields a schema for categorizing behavior in terms of the kinds of meaning it produces.

We can also gloss our axes along slightly different but parallel terms. The vertical axis could just as easily be read as "extrinsically motivated" vs. "intrinsically motivated"- the one referring things we do in pursuit of some anticipated future state or in response to a subjectively-external demand, the other to those endeavors which are personally meaningful precisely in their freedom from external imposition or eventuality. We could also call this opposition "instrumental" vs. "experiential", or any other number of related terms. The important point is that activities on the bottom half of my scheme subscribe to a teleological schema- they presume a particular end-state- and those on the right side subscribe to a processual schema- they presume a patterned manner of approaching that end-state, specified or otherwise. The manner in which these different sort of schema interact with one another at various levels- sensual, cognitive, emotional, social, etc.- is the place I am going to, and I am going to get there by playing around a bit with some ideas.

Wait A Second...

Even if you are willing to accept my somewhat counter-intuitive definitions which provide for this analysis, there are a number of reasonable objections to make to such a schematization. I'll try to address them here, at least provisionally.

...Are Constraint and Consequence Really What Counts?

Yes and no. Like any theory, this one accounts for some materials and excludes others. Some notable exclusions here include: Affect, power, and historical contingency. Quite obviously, any and all of these factors, and many others beside, will have a crucial role in the real-world happening of any given act of "play", etc. Viewing human behavior as primarily stylized/"freeform" and consequential/inconsequential is a perspective intended to make clear certain systemic tendencies which I will argue for throughout the course of this work. This theory cannot explain why certain societies might be more playful than others, or how a particular form of play expresses a cultural logic, or any of a myriad other fascinating questions. The idea here is to explain how the ways we frame and pursue certain activities interact with contiguous but different frames of meaning. And it is *meaning* which is most central to my interest here: how play and work and game produce meaning differently, both alone and in conjunction with one another.

...Behavior Isn't That Cut And Dried!

No, it isn't. None of my categories should be understood as binary, or mutually exclusive. Quite obviously, "work" can be quite playful, and while my primary engagement with a form of play might be intrinsically-motivated, I can still anticipate and desire extrinsic effects; for instance, to impress another player with my skill in order to manipulate our long-term relationship. I use the noun forms of "play", "work", etc. mostly as a convenience- what is really meant by "play" here is "highly playful activity". The ambiguity and restlessness of real life is unfortunate only for the analyst, whose job is to dissect. The material at hand here is a great deal more like a lumpy stew than anything so well-organized as an organism, and there's no real way to get all the broth out of the beef. That does not mean, however, that we can't recognize the very real difference between beef and broth, and perhaps make use of that recognition toward a recipe for a somewhat heartier, more nourishing stew.

...Isn't Play Also Extrinsically Motivated?

One can certainly make the argument that "play" and "game" are no less bound to consequence or telos than other activities: they have as their "goal" the elicitation of certain feelings, most notably that which we call "fun". This is true to the extent that when such activities fail to elicit the desired experiences, we tend not to perform them further. But when you ask somebody why they engage in a particular form of

recreation, one almost never hears the response, “In order to have fun”. What you are far more likely to get is, “Because it *is* fun”. I don’t think this is simply a matter of semantics. Playful activities are not typically entered into with an expectation that they will *eventuate* into pleasure- the enjoyment (or other form of experience) we seek is, subjectively, part and parcel of the act itself. Hence our general inability to explain the reasons why a particular pastime is enjoyable- the results are inseparable from the style they are lodged in. I’m going to try to convince you that the commonsensical gloss that “[x] *is* fun”, rather than “[x] *results in* fun” is actually more true, or at least more analytically appropriate to my ends.

...Games Are *Definitely* Extrinsicly Motivated!

Games, as a rule, have set victory conditions, or at least a defined end-point of some kind. In our gaming, we might ruthlessly pursue a goal, and *within* the meaningful frame of the game, *all* our activity might be teleologically-oriented. But from the perspective of the world *outside* the game, the game itself is unmotivated. In other words, when we are *about to* game, it is intrinsically-motivated; entering into the game is essentially the *intrinsically motivated* adoption of an *extrinsic motivation*. Keeping in mind the differences between how things look from the inside vs. the outside will be key to understanding my approach.

...Isn't This An Ethnocentric Understanding of Play?

Sutton-Smith's incisive analysis of the various "rhetorics of play" operating in our culture (1992) does an important service to the field: to identify the cultural biases and power relations at work in the various ways we define, validate, and negate play. In his terms, my theory follows variously from the "rhetoric of the self" and "rhetoric of the imaginary", both which find their roots in Western romanticism and the attendant privileging of the creative, individual, and intrinsic as against the social and the performative or reproductive aspects of activity. These rhetorics are championed primarily by members of the Western industrialized leisure class to which I belong, and as such, their presence in a putatively "objective" analysis is suspect. Inasmuch as I am not concerned with ranking or quantifying different forms of play, or operationalizing my ideas in an institutional setting, the most pernicious aspects of these rhetorics may be in abeyance. But I will do my best to demonstrate that, whatever their recreational pursuits may be or how they are motivated, that humans worldwide tend to construct their lifeworlds in ways that can be accurately (if, again, only partially) described in the terms I present here.

...There Are Some Weird Things In Your Categories Here.

Play studies generally seek to address play as a conventionally-defined sphere of activity. Huizinga's (1970) seminal work on play spills a great deal of ink

addressing the ways different societies have defined play, and the linguistic and historical linkages between play and other fields of activity. As fascinating as such topics are, they are not appropriate to my aims here, which are to identify some distinct, analytically-defined (rather than socially constructed) categories which might capture some of what is going on in a cross-cultural context. Even beyond the separation I've raised between "play" and "game", my definitions provide for some rather counter-intuitive categorizations. From my perspective, professional athletes are much more "workers" than "players" or "gamers"; a great deal of what goes on in the corporate world is "ritual" and not "work"; and many forms of grieving can be thought of as "playful", although certainly not fun. I'll do as much as I can to unpack the baggage of these words before sending them on this trip, but to appreciate the endeavor, you'll have to do your best to disregard some of the not-too-useful bits of gear they might have brought along.

Enough preamble. Let's go!

The Elusivity of Play

I begin with the elemental and massively significant observation made by Gregory Bateson that play-signals in animals are meta-communicative- that they both say something, *and* say something about the saying of it (1972: 180). So, in his phrasing, while a nip denotes or stands for a bite, it also says that it does *not* mean that which a bite means. He goes on to note that this is in defiance with the rules of logic, but not of those of human (or animal) thought. In this simple observation I believe we find the core of play: it asks us to “go meta”. In other words, playful thought and activity acts not only within, but *upon* the rules by which we organize our lives. To be convinced of this, a cursory look at humor (which, if it is not play, nothing is) should suffice. The lowliest form of humor, the pun, also makes clearest the meta-significance of humor.

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Norma Lee.”

“Norma Lee who?”

“Norma Lee I don’t go around knocking on doors, but I just had to meet you!”

The knock-knock joke, lowbrow or childish as it might be, is based upon a sophisticated capacity of human beings to go meta. In this case, a familiar scenario is up-ended when one element- a first name- is made to serve as an element of another kind entirely- a portion of a sentence. Common sense tells us that the name “Norma

Lee” is entirely distinct from and unrelated to the word “normally”, and in any case, description of one’s habits is not a proper response to the question of “Who’s there.” But the phonics of the name and the word being shared makes available the playful option to regard them as a single item. To get the joke, you have to stop treating words and names as means of identifying distinct ideas in order to communicate instrumental meanings, and instead regard them simply as *sound*- which, in fact, is what they are. The “rules” of language are broken, but not *only* broken; if they were, we would be left with a bit of nonsense, not a joke. The phonic similarity is exploited to make us see language from a different, higher-order perspective for a moment, as patterns of sounds which depend on context to achieve their meaningfulness. Here’s another knock-knock joke of a slightly different kind:

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Banana.”

“Banana who?”

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Banana.”

“Banana who?”

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“Orange.”

“Orange who?”

“ORANGE YOU GLAD I DIDN’T SAY BANANA!”

In this case, there is a similar meta-linguistic case of punnery in the use of “orange” in place of “aren’t”. But this joke goes meta in two other directions also- first, in its treatment of the rules of the knock-knock joke itself, which are violated by the “banana” repetition; and also, by playing off the listener’s irritation with that repetition. So in addition to being a joke about language, it is also a joke about jokes, as well as a joke *on* someone. At all three levels, it is the exposure and manipulation of the material that structures the joke which provides the humor. If the joke were told ironically, in order to criticize the comedic paucity of the knock-knock joke format, another level of meta-action would have to be added to our understanding of the joke. In any case, the jokes all *break rules*. They directly conflict with the patterns of usage which makes language meaningful and useful on a daily basis, and in doing so, actually identify and point at those rules (from “outside”), and perhaps even suggest possibilities for other ways of speaking than those to which we are accustomed- and if you’re not sure about this, ask a Cockney.

Metaphor, similarly, is inherently playful. While the capacity to recognize similarities between different things is a fairly mundane human capacity, metaphor goes one step further and says that two things *are the same thing*. This is in direct violation of common sense- we know full well that all the world’s *not* a stage, in the conventional sense of a wooden assemblage intended to support a theatrical event. The metaphor asks us to consider the possibility that perhaps these two dissimilar things,

for all their differences, have something to say about one another. Metaphor differs from simple comparison in its playfulness. It is open-ended. The idea that “all the world’s a stage” can be conventionally understood in certain ways, ratified by literature professors and their ilk, but none of these interpretations can be considered final or ultimately authoritative. The interpretation of such a metaphor is ultimately a highly personal, open-ended process with no defined endpoint. Perhaps the world’s a stage because the things that happen on it are illusory as the scenes played out in a theater. Or because in the world we must adopt roles and play them as well as we can. Or perhaps the metaphor is saying more of stages than it is of the world- that our fantasies and dramas contain within them worlds of meaning. From a near-infinite array of possible correspondences, the metaphor demands we draw out *some* meaning, but no one in particular.

The question this raises is *Why*. If Shakespeare’s intent was to communicate his ideas directly and clearly, he could have done so without leaving his audience in the relative wilderness of the hermeneutic circle. Obviously, such a rendition of his play would have been empty of any of the substance which we seek out in theater- to be absorbed into a tapestry of meaning which compels us with intense internal sensations. This is simply another way of asking, *What are aesthetics*. And playfulness is somewhere very, very near the heart of that question, which brings me to a second important element of play in metaphor- *sensuality*. The use of a metaphor impels the listener to visualize (or tactilize or olfactize, etc.) each term in the metaphor in search of correspondences, in a way not necessary with more straightforward uses

of language. Definitions or denotations do not help us much in interpreting metaphor exactly because metaphors strive to bring into contiguity the discontinuous- the notion of “the world” (a large ball of dirt where everyone you know lives) and the notion of “the stage” (a place where actors get paid to lie to you) don’t offer up any meaningful continuities, and while a person who has never seen a theater performance might be able to cognitively understand the metaphor, it is highly unlikely he could ever “get it” aesthetically. He would simply not have a sufficient repertoire of sensual experiences to draw upon to make the metaphor personally meaningful, and thereby emotionally and aesthetically effective. Straightforward language can also, obviously, elicit the imaginative senses, but generally it does not demand it.

Why equate or correlate play with sensuality? In this case, the study of children at play is instructive. First, we can note that when questioned about their play experiences, children first and foremost recall and relate the minutiae of their play, rather than its generalized or abstracted features (Sutton-Smith 1997:192). It is the individual movements in the game which capture their attention- precisely the material where the senses are most engaged. Sutton-Smith, quoting Feitelson (1975:211) notes that “one of the most important factors toward creating a successful play teaching session was to... continue by all means a continuous flow of active connected play... ‘What do you want to play?’ was thus the most fatal of beginnings for any teaching session... an earlier [more productive] step would in most cases be just picking up something... and holding it to the doll’s mouth, maybe emitting a munching sound”. In the absence of sensual engagement, and under the onus to self-instigate a play state,

young children largely fail, and adults do not do too much better.

One might rightly wonder how such a view accounts for cerebral forms of playfulness. Certainly the geniuses of many different disciplines, including the hard sciences, should not be rendered as unplayful *a priori* simply because their domain of activity is relatively free from sensory input. Sensuality in the way I mean it is not a matter of being *necessarily* beholden to the sense organs as such. Rather, it is a matter of engaging with a quantity of information which is *excessive* relative to the problem at hand. The perceptual world basically always provides such an excess- there is always more going on than we have words to describe or schema to categorize- but internal, imaginative worlds can do the same. Bateson, a playful thinker if there ever was one, points us toward this in his musings on “loose and strict thinking” (1972:75-87). His attempts to think through issues of culture and society on a highly abstract level were made possible by a sensual familiarity with a very different sort of phenomenon: invertebrate anatomy. In seeking a theory for the structure of authority among the Iatmul, he turned to the lobster, for “in the field of animal segmentation... at least the problems are more concrete than in the social field” (1972:76). “Concrete” is to say “sensually available” and “possessed of characteristics beyond those that obviously serve my needs”. Indeed, he eventually finds that the analogy between lobsters and jellyfish on the one hand, and hierarchical versus heterarchical societies on the other, only goes so far- the lobster necessarily has properties which are inappropriate to the target domain to which he applies them. But it was in the process of exploring the manifold character of lobsters and jellyfish that he arrived at an

important distinction between various kinds of social arrangements, which he could then put to use as a more unambiguous abstraction. This is playfulness in the service of work, or if you prefer, work which generates playfulness.

Sensuality is similarly implicated in purely social play, inasmuch as the vitality of social interaction is in the *feelings* which accompany it. Without taking up the issue of analytically distinguishing emotion from affect, we can talk about socially-generated feelings as happening in the body and the senses. They come as a punch in the gut or the crawling of your skin, a lightness in your step or a weight around your neck. It is “mental” feeling in that its direct stimulus is in the mind, arising from the activity of structures of belief or thought or feeling rather than pressure, heat, etc., but this does not make it reducible to the ideational. Among the earliest vivid memories I can recall is that of being playfully chased by my father. I was probably four years old or so. As he got closer and closer to “getting me” (which never had any specified consequences, explicitly or in my own thought), I remember a tremendous feeling of both terror and glee. The idea of being “got” had a nebulous but immense hold on me, and I felt as if my hair was standing on end, my lungs jumping into my throat. At the same time, the idea was delicious. Every movement Dad made had a vividness, intensity, and *meaningfulness* that was not part of my everyday experience. Some of those meanings were purely kinesthetic- an animalistic sensitivity to the slightest movement and what it said about what his body was going to do next. There were also social meanings in it: my Dad, the big, scary animal. And new meanings for myself of myself- as a daredevil and confronter of monsters, and a prey animal too. I wanted it

to go on forever, the moment before being got. I wanted to suspend time just as I was suspended between fear and love. Taking pleasure in one's own fear is, of course, a form of meta-feeling.

But of course, the moment *couldn't* last forever. While both not-being-gotten and almost-being-gotten paled next to about-to-be-gotten, the latter can only exist in time between the two. And this is what is meant by the heading "the elusivity of play". Playfulness as I have used it seems to normally be extraordinarily ephemeral. The moment it is there, it is gone. There seems to be an entropic burden on the playful process, that while it can leap up and dance on thin air for a moment, it must always come back to the ground. And this is why there *are* canonical interpretations of Shakespeare, and in large measure why there are such things as games. As a sensual process, play demands external input. If I have stressed the intrinsicity of play overmuch, or treated it too individualistically, let it be mended here: Play is not to be equated with absolute autonomy, and it seems like most of all we want to play *with each other*. This is impossible, or at least devilishly hard, without the ability to establish shared meanings, even as a structure for the subversion of *other* shared meanings. And even in solitary play, we can form meaning only as a building-on process. Even daydreams have narrative structures, where one thing "follows" the next not only temporally but conceptually. Our most idiosyncratic thoughts are often highly conventionalized *for ourselves*.

For an example of this, consider the phenomenon of "street ball", or basketball as played in predominantly black American urban neighborhoods (if you're not

familiar with the medium, just search YouTube for “the Notic” for some exemplary cases). Street ball follows the same *explicit* rules as the basketball we all know, but looks very different on the ground. It is characterized by a combination of unorthodox elements: whole-body interaction with the ball involving the head, feet, neck, even the clothing worn by the player; risky, strategically-invalid maneuvers which intentionally expose the ball to the risk of being stolen; and gestures, such as checking the ball off an opponent’s face, which are much more meaningful socially than athletically. The ingenuity and expressiveness of the best street ball players is truly stunning, incorporating athleticism, wit, and a thoroughgoing resourcefulness that privileges the idiosyncratic over the systematic. Whoever was the first to check a ball off a rival’s head, or hide it under his shirt, or swing it over his opponent’s head in a feinted pass, was most definitely “going meta” on basketball. But the raw playfulness of that seminal act necessarily lead to a stylization of the art form- the play became a game. And if you watch a streetball mix tape, you’ll notice the stylistic homogeneity of the performance. The ball can be used to insult or harass an opponent, but is never used to caress or cheer on. Most moves revolve around fake-outs that bring the ball to within an opponent’s reach, but unpredictably so. Consciously or otherwise, street ball players take on a set of constraints on their play which correspond to the constraints *broken* in the initial act of play. If it were otherwise, we’d not have any particular thing to call “street ball”.

I find Brian Massumi’s (2002) notions of “intensity” vs. “qualification/content” immensely instructive in terms of thinking about playfulness

and where it comes from. He describes a set of two parallel-but-distinct response systems in the experience of images, one keyed to gauging the conventionalized content of the image, the other to generating a quantitative affective response. In his words, “the level of intensity is characterized by a crossing of semantic wires: on it, sadness is pleasant... It does not fix distinctions. Instead, it vaguely but insistently connects what is normally indexed as separate. When asked to signify itself, it can do so only in a paradox” (2002:24). He goes on: “Intensity is beside that loop [of qualified meaning], a non-conscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder. It is outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function. It is narratively delocalized, spreading... like a lateral backwash from the function-meaning interloops that travel the vertical path between head and heart” (2002: 25).

Despite the fact that he is speaking of a concept more-or-less distinct from the one I am addressing, almost everything he says is equally applicable to my case. The going-meta of play is, more likely than not, entirely pre-conscious. The teller of a knock-knock joke does not need to understand anything of the linguistic distinction between signified and signifier to take pleasure in their confusion, nor a street baller to know that there is an implicit schema to basketball which he is in violation of in order to know that dribbling the ball through your opponent’s legs is fresh to death. Those experiences achieve their ludic significance for the player through the sensual intensity of surprise. The play-experience runs parallel to the instrumental, and the moment it is called by name, it evaporates. But the ludic remains ever at-hand, waiting to come into

being.

Massumi offers us another important idea which might bring a great deal of clarity to the apparently arbitrary, chaotic nature of the playful. Rather than thinking of motivation in positive terms, he contends that the will is essentially subtractive in nature. Quoting Libet, he says that “we may exert free will not by initiating intentions but by vetoing, acceding or otherwise responding to them after they have arisen” (2002: 29). This is an extraordinary notion, that the body-brain-mind complex generates its desires and impulses all on its own, and that our conscious egos have only an editorial role in the actual expression of those impulses. But it seems to be in accord with what we experience during play- movements of feeling which seem to come both from inside and outside of ourselves. In play we find ourselves shocked by ourselves, by the satisfaction of urges we didn’t know we had. If play represents an abeyance of the subtractive or editorial function of the will, it would account for what is observed in animal play: “exaggerated gestures, jerky movements, grotesque play faces, and light fast movements... play signals include a relaxed, open-mouthed facial expression... and a variety of... movements, often performed off-center, off-balance, or located in a plane transverse to the longitudinal body axis” (Fagen in Pellegrini 1995: 24). All this sounds to me like a brain-body which is trying to accommodate an unusually high bandwidth of feeling and action- that certain controls and resistances have been lowered, and the constraints of functional behavior been cast up into the air for a moment. The more we play, and particularly the more we play with others, the more that play becomes subject to qualification and schematization. In order to

achieve a meaningful sequence, static significances must be assigned to the elements of the play and, at least momentarily, treated as non-arbitrary. What was once pure make-believe becomes “Cowboys and Indians”, a set piece with its own demands.

The upshot of all of this is an answer to the question I posed at the outset, which is, *How does play create meaning?* The answer I will suggest is that, in fact, it does not- or at least, it has only *negative* meaning, to the effect of, *These things don't mean what you think they do*. Play does not assert, it questions. It has a semiotic function which is both corrosive and generative- corrosive because it destabilizes established meanings, generative because it does so through the re-vivification of the sensual properties of signifiers which have been suppressed by their semantico-referential functions.

Games: Where Play Goes To Die (And Live)

If I am right, or at least analytically clear, that “play” labors under an entropic burden of qualification which makes it descend almost immediately to the level of game, we could rightly ask a few questions on the topic of games: *What do they have to do with play? How do they work, and how do they produce ludic experiences like that of play?* In other words, if games are ossified forms of play, then what makes them different from other forms of activity?

It might serve to say a few words on the nature of “work”, in my sense of any activity which is beholden to an expectation or pre-conceived telos. Work is not hostile to creativity simply because it is not play. In a world replete with multiplicity and complexity, the shortest distance between two points can be a mazy path indeed. Work-frames are open-ended on the back side- while they submit to only a single valid resolution or output, the number of inputs to get you there are theoretically infinite. It is for this reason that work is often *hard*. It requires a significant, sometimes enormous, exertion of the subtractive power of consciousness in order to edit down the vastness of reality to a streamlined, functional remainder. There is as much autonomy in this act as there is in the sensual absorption of play, and perhaps even more; in work we are slaves to the world, and in play we are slaves to our senses. Being that the world is bigger than our sense of it, the work mode in certain respects offers *more*, rather than less, opportunities for engagement. But it does so under the scrutiny of functional schema which do not know themselves as such- that is, work

does not “go meta”. I cannot take time out to contemplate the difference between reality and perception if I want to drive safely to my dentist appointment, or treat words as music if I want to communicate clearly. The work-frame is a constant hewing, both hewing *at* and hewing *to*. It deletes, and it conforms.

Gameplay, on the other hand, looks from the outside as a complete inversion of the work-frame, and from the inside as an amplification of it. *Before* we game, the choice to do so appears as the option to adopt a set of arbitrary strictures on our activity, which is directed toward an end with no value outside the context of the game. Once we *are* gaming, it appears as a single-minded pursuit of a telos in accord with a set of rules which are no less absolute than gravity or thermodynamics. So there is a second level of entropy at work here: play cannot be played without becoming a game, but games cannot be gamed without becoming work. Again, it is in the interstices between frames, and not in their interiors, that their substance is located. Which is precisely where we find the playful in games- in the moment of choosing to take on the game-world. I think it should be clear that entering into a game is a meta-going: a sudden appreciation of constraints as something that can be *chosen* as well as imposed upon or labored under. The pleasure of limiting ourselves is a form of exceeding ourselves, because in the gameplay we find forms of mastery and virtuosity that could not be meaningful in an instrumental context. Both within work, and within game, our actions are meaningful with respect to the ways that they realize a telos. But *between* games, games are meaningful in their very arbitrariness. It is the playful capacity to enter into the world of the game which provides it with the meaning that

differentiates it from work. In a work-frame, the standard by which an activity can be said to be “successful” or not is the degree to which it approximates the preconceived end; i.e., if my work is to build a house, but it collapses as soon as finished, I cannot have been said to have “built a house”, only *tried* to build a house. Similarly, within a game we win or lose- presuming the game permits such a conceit- on the basis of realizing a similar end-state condition. But at the level at which we evaluate the game as a whole, individual end-states are not pertinent- only the *process* is relevant. In other words, whether I win or lose at chess, it cannot be denied that I did in fact *play chess*, provided that I abided by the strictures of the gameplay. None of this contradicts the passion, doggedness, and teleologically-minded focus of gamers striving to win. The crucial difference lies in what happens when the task is finished- in the one case, I have wasted a great deal of scarce resources, and someone is going to be sleeping under the stars that night. In the other, I am free to play another game of chess at any time, no worse off than before, and perhaps a bit better in light of my learning experience.

In the same way that the internal structure of a game is a highly focused form of work, it is clear that the exterior structure of a work frame is a game. The constraints of matter or social fact which impose themselves on the work frame are, in fact, rules of the same kind as those that tell how a knight piece may move or what kinds of ball handling count as “carrying”. The difference is in our subjective experience of those rules- whether they appear to us as freely-chosen and arbitrary, or as absolute and “real”. But the play-element is ever-ready to subvert the givens of

reality, to go meta on them and treat them as arbitrary. Like Huizinga (1970), I suspect that our deepest and most vivid forms of religious experience are of the exact same order as our playful experience. The religious martyr is a game-player of the highest order, in that he understands that the earthly consequences of his actions are only second-order manifestations of a higher, divinely-mandated reality. He can lose life and limb without (much) concern, because to him these things are no more real than the moves on a chessboard- meaningful only in their conformity to a higher-order set of meta-rules generally glossed as “piety”. But this meta-level perspective is frustratingly difficult to maintain. For games to proceed in line with their unique form of meaning, players must perform a playful operation of exceeding difficulty. They must engage vigorously and whole-heartedly with the universe described by the game environment, pursuing the game-end as seriously as if it were of real consequence- but at the same time remembering, in the words of King Arthur’s squire in “Monty Python’s Quest For The Holy Grail”, that after all, “it’s only a model”. This is another form of suspension- suspended between meaningless arbitrariness and fatal consequentiality. At one pole, the game falls apart as players lose interest, no longer willing to exert themselves toward an end without meaning- they become spoil-sports. At the other, the end of the game becomes more important than its process, and the players become sore losers, unsportsmanlike winners, or flat-out cheaters. Huizinga notes (1970: 30) that, of the two, we revile the spoil-sport more than the cheater. The latter at least shares our in-game passion for the telos, even if his subversion is corrosive to our ability to game together. In a sense, cheating is play of the highest

order.

What kind of meaning, then, do games produce? Again, *within* the game meaning is of the same contingent, indexical kind which defines the work-frame: moving my knight to your king's position *means* you have been checkmated, in the same way driving a nail into two planks of wood *means* they are fixed into a single structure. The larger question is that of what games mean *outside* their own bounds. If games are, as I have said, inconsequential and stylized, I think I can assert that they produce *hypothetical* or *subjunctive* meaning. That is, games are a way of talking about ourselves and others in the mode of "what if..." So black and white football players may compete on the same field *as if* they were not each implicated in a racial hierarchy; *as if* hostility and conflict were socially acceptable; *as if* their relationships to one another were as clearly defined as those between quarterback and wide receiver. Games postulate about potential conditions of existence by modeling them, and in doing so, create potential for the adoption of new values and ways of being in the world. That is, they assert things that are not true, such as the notion that putting a ball through a hoop is a matter of great importance; but, by metaphor, those lies suggest other kinds of imperatives; that one *ought* to strive in pursuit of one's goals, *ought* to make sacrifices for the good of the group, *ought* to be humble in victory and gracious in defeat. Generally, we hypocognize the "truths" of games, because if we treated them as truly indexical (and therefore consequential), they would lose the property for which we most value them: as a free space in which to explore potentialities. Quite often, the potentials they open for exploration are socially

unacceptable, reflections of what Stromberg (2009:123) notes as the outcomes of emotionally-intense forms of consumption: "...a value is constructed which is not a value. It is subterranean and potentially disruptive; it is inexorable and beyond our capacity to control". In the absorption of the game and its attendant fanfare, we might come to believe that we *ought* to be the center of attention, *ought* to dominate our opponents, *ought* to demonstrate mastery at all moments. None of these *oughts*, prosocial or "dark", is beholden to a hypothetical imperative of "so that..." Those imperatives belong to the work sphere, and while games certainly can suggest such connections, that fact cannot explain their existence; games might teach, but they are not training per se.

Of course, in practice, this division between "game" and "work" is exceedingly porous and fragile, because in the playfulness generated by the game, distinctions lose their power to divide. The sensual experiences of confraternity and mutual struggle give rise to real social ties between teammates; chess players feel real sensations of dominance and mastery in their victories; streetballers get into real fights over the gameful maneuvers of their opponents. In each case, there has been a conflation between putatively separate domains of experience, because the human aptitude for metaphor exceeds that of our analytical rigor.

Case Study: Inuit Morality Play

The work of Jean Briggs among Inuit communities provides us with a rich, detailed, and intimate account of social interactions in a community of people who are deeply concerned with both playfulness and the exigent demands of life-in-the-world. As Briggs notes, “one of the highest terms of praise for a mature Inuk is that he or she ‘doesn’t take it seriously’” (1998:175). Life in the Arctic is filled with necessities- for food, shelter, warmth, as well as sociality, alliances, reputations and the like. And it is likewise filled with uncontrollable eventualities- rain, snow, sickness, loneliness and anger. Inuit people must be both adept, competent workers, and also labile, flexible players. “So when a sudden rain makes a sieve of the canvas roof they laugh: ‘We are wet like dogs.’” (Briggs 1970:31). The juxtaposition of laborious imperatives (which demand instrumental action) with the ungovernable vicissitudes of the world (which demand to be stylized in manageable, intelligible ways) makes these communities an excellent kaleidoscope for looking at the relationship between play, games, work, and ritual. In the following pages I will take up the source material provided by Briggs for analysis under the rubric I have provided, which should demonstrate that certain issues can be clarified by this approach.

Inuit culture, Briggs reports, is broadly characterized by a subtle but serious injunction against “taking things too seriously”, or at least against *demonstrating* that one is taking things too seriously. Both affection and aggression are highly attenuated among adult Inuit. Social demonstrations, both positive and negative, are subdued if

visible at all; and interior states seem to be regulated (of course, differentially between individuals) in a similar manner. So, as one informant states, “When [my daughter] Kamik is away at school I miss her; it makes me feel uncomfortable... People don’t like to feel uncomfortable. If one doesn’t love too much it is good” (Briggs 1970:322). Even moreso than love and affection, which carry their own risks, anger or malevolence are not to be indulged under any circumstances, as even angry *thoughts* are understood to have the power to bring ill fortune to their object (Briggs 1970:332). Mild forms of annoyance (“urulu”) are expressed indirectly and without evident affect (Briggs 1970:334). And simple boisterousness, free of social implications, is regarded as being prone to lead to nightmares (1970:350). In sum, Inuit cultural norms support the proposition that emotion unchecked by reason, restraint, and equanimity can have disastrous consequences, and perhaps the single most important criteria for proper adulthood is the ability to moderate both one’s subjective feeling and social presentation of those feelings.

This presents us with a relevant “work-frame” in Inuit society. Emotions and social behavior are evaluated at this level in terms of their consequentiality- the outcomes they bring, as distinct from the raw experience of them (as the playful), or the micro-worlds they produce (as the gameful), etc. To reiterate my method here, this is not to say that these other dimensions of meaning are irrelevant or ontologically distinct; only that the analytical operation of distinguishing the one from the other can reveal patterns of interaction between them. With this in mind, let’s consider how this instrumental need is variously served and undermined by proximate cultural systems

and tropes of game and play.

The role of humor in Inuit society, which I have already remarked on, deserves further explication. Almost any hardship, obstacle, or annoyance is addressed through laughter and teasing. Briggs notes that the Inuit themselves explicitly pose humorfulness (“*tiphi*”) against irritation (“*uluru*”), and instruct their children in the operation of substituting the one for the other (1970:340). Her informants were as likely to find hilarity in their own misfortunes as those of others- almost any experience which registered as unexpected, untoward, inconvenient, or novel was addressed through humor and laughter. Briggs (1970:341) interprets the Inuit use of humor as having three functions: first, to express and demonstrate a happy, likable persona; secondly, to cathartically address and diminish the unpleasantness of a situation; thirdly, as a way of “expressing, and simultaneously denying, hostility” (ibid). It is the latter function which is most important to my purposes here. The cultural prohibition against feelings of hostility and their attendant dangers does not itself resolve the problem of how to address such feelings when they arrive, as they inevitably must in any community of diverse individuals living in intimate proximity.

Here is where I locate the “playful” level of this cultural complex. One of the properties of humor as meta-communication/meta-action is the capacity to say one thing while simultaneously disavowing responsibility for the statement- the nip is not the bite for which it stands... but neither is it the *opposite* of a bite. As with Bateson’s nipping dogs, who do not “know” whether they are playing or fighting until the sequence is resolved (1972:141), punitive teasing seems to say: “You’ve done

something wrong, but it would be wrong of me to scold you for it; if you laugh with me about it, I will know that you understand your mistake and so it will be of no consequence”. Teasing balances on the razor’s edge between amity and hostility, and in doing so raises participants’ awareness of the precariousness of their position between the two. This semiotic indeterminacy is not incidental to cultural functioning. Approached from a work-frame mentality, in which scolding, supplication, or some other direct form of social manipulation would be employed, social relations between the participants are necessarily disturbed; one becomes dominant or authoritative, the other subordinate or ostracized. The playful use of humor incites, rather, the object of teasing to undertake their own self-regulation, thereby maintaining the autonomy and self-respect of all involved with a minimum disruption of established social roles. In a social world like that of the Inuit, where unilateral authority is thoroughly suppressed and discouraged, the ability to elicit self-monitoring in others is of paramount importance.

But between the teleological demands of the instrumental and the catalytic potential of the playful, a mediating field is necessary. Teasing works because it is a *genre* of behavior, which is to say, a sort of game. It is the gamefulness of teasing which makes it intelligible as a social practice, rather than a purely individual opportunity for amusement. The rules of teasing might be formalized as something like:

1. Teasing may be initiated in the presence of the novel, unorthodox, or socially undesirable. One does not initiate teasing with respect to the mundane, the

expected, or the valorous.

2. The teaser offers a criticism of or uncertainty toward the teased, while simultaneously offering social cues- laughter, smiles, and the linguistic element *takhaa*- which indicate the playful context of the criticism.

3. The teased indicates recognition and acceptance of the criticism by returning cues such as laughter. Failure to do so indicates a refusal to participate in the game, which is to say, to reject the criticism and initiate open social hostility.

We can confirm these rules by supposing their contraries. If Rule 1 is not followed, and teasing is applied arbitrarily to any sort of stimuli, it loses its *social* capacity to address heterodox behavior, even if it maintains its intrapersonal functions. If Rule 2 is not followed, the playful context of the teasing is not apparent, and open hostility ensues. And the same is true for Rule 3.

One can begin to see how social game-playing of this kind not only functionally supports the consequential aims of Inuit society- to correct recalcitrant behavior and minimize social friction- but is itself the product of the conflict between these two aims. In a serious, straightforward mode, efforts to correct behavior will necessarily be frictive- an impasse between the two imperatives. The playful element arises out of this conflict: the need to “go meta” on the social scenario, and to reframe the terms of the conflict in a manageable, meaningful way, resulting in the production of a social game called “teasing”. I term this a “game” rather than a social strategy more generally due to the necessary disavowal of the consequences of teasing- in other words, teasing marks itself as not being what it is. If participants were explicitly aware

of the disciplinary function of such teasing, it would negate the effect of concealing (and thus mitigating) social conflict (Briggs 1998:10).

The consequences for being a “spoil-sport” in such a social game are made clear for us in Briggs’ work- happily for us, less so for her- in an incident in which, in an attempt to act as advocate for her informants vis-à-vis some white sportsmen, she violates the second rule and phrases her criticism of them humorlessly. In spite of there being no clear consequences from this breach in terms of the transaction between the sportsmen and the Inuit, Briggs finds herself ostracized as a social pariah, and specifically as one who was prone “to get angry very easily without cause” (1970:286). While certainly it is possible that the Inuit feared instrumental repercussions from her outburst, there seems to be no evidence for such a conclusion- and since the ethnographer has done us the dubious favor of breaching the privacy of letters sent by her informants which specifically criticize her behavior, without mention of any fears of particular consequences, I think the conflict can safely be construed as a failure in the game-sphere rather than the work-sphere. Briggs failed to stylize her behavior appropriately in an Inuit context, treating the constraints of social convention as arbitrary (which they are) rather than absolute (which the game of etiquette demands).

For the subliminal practices of social games to be efficacious, they must remain covert, and for this to be possible, the premises which underlie them must be instilled and internalized at a pre-conscious level. Briggs’ work on “Inuit morality play” (1998) demonstrates the sorts of open-ended, affectively-fraught scenarios

which Inuit parents develop with children and which lay the groundwork for future social games. These games are analytically tricky because they are highly asymmetrical. One party, the adult, has more-or-less full cultural competence and a well-developed sense of the difference between serious and unserious behavior. Their unserious behavior, often in the form of affectionate physical badgering (“ugiat-”ing) will not necessarily be interpreted as such by the child who is its object, and who is likely pursuing goals which are, for themselves, of the greatest consequence.

Moreover, even adults in these scenarios may bear interests that they themselves are not fully aware of- in the psychodramas they initiate with children, they may be actors and audience members as well as the directors they pose as. Disentangling the various motivations and meanings which structure these interactions from their consequences is a fraught, but worthwhile task.

Inuit pedagogy aims to “make one think” [isummaksaiyuq] (Briggs 1998:5), a gloss which I find not too far off from “going meta”. In other words, in order to advance toward adulthood, Inuit children are impelled to develop “ihuma” (reason), evidenced by their ability to monitor and regulate their own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Learning of this kind is ideally conceived as “teaching” rather than “scolding” (Briggs 1970:331), and so rather than imposing clear-cut consequences for “bad” behavior, Inuit parents are more apt to pose dilemmas. Like koans in Zen practice, these morality games set up problems for children which are irresolvable in terms of the systems in which they are accustomed to operate, and demand that the terms of that system be opened for interrogation. The child’s instrumental needs are set against

each other in such a way that a playful meta-response is elicited, until such time as the child is capable of engaging in such interactions in stylized manners which indicate a growing mastery of social gamesmanship.

In one such encounter (Briggs 1970:40-44), our “protagonist”- a three year-old under the pseudonym “Chubby Maata”- is in the company of her mother, four year-old sister, and teenage aunt. As the youngest of the family and still nominally categorized as a “baby”, Chubby Maata is displeased to find that her sister Rosi has occupied the place of pride between her mother’s knees and will not relinquish it. For Chubby Maata, then, this is a situation requiring instrumental tactics- she must find some way to reclaim her valued position in proximity to her mother. Her verbalized demands to this effect are met first with silence from her mother, who, to the best of our knowledge, has little or nothing at stake in the scenario. Maata is forced to shift her focus to a more accessible aim, and successfully elicits her mother’s attention by pulling a piece of gum from her mother’s mouth and chewing it, a familiar form of sharing between mother and child. This initiates a simple imitation game in which Maata is the object of all the sensuous cooing and caressing which she has already likely begun to associate with her status as a prized, adorable baby.

The morality play begins in earnest when Maata’s aunt surreptitiously *ugiat-s* her with a gentle boot to the bottom. This aggression, playful on the adult’s part but not necessarily so from Maata’s perspective, incites her interloping sister to attack. A wrestling match follows, which causes Maata’s mother to comment: “Because you’re a baby she’s attacking you... say *ungaa* [cry like a baby] and I’ll rescue you”. The

wrestling continues playfully for a while, until Maata's sister exercises a little too much force and causes enough pain to evoke distress and fear- a collapse of the game-frame. Maata's mother intervenes now, capturing the elder sister and enjoining Maata to "hurt her; make her angry"- but in a attenuated fashion, not by pulling her hair as Maata suggests, but by holding her down. This provokes a burst of energy from Maata's sister, and the two begin to spar somewhat more earnestly, causing Maata's mother to end the scenario with the threat of approaching strangers from another camp, a threat laden with very real anxieties for the children. After some further playful interrogation, the family leaves for home.

I've omitted several details from Briggs' account, and I will not repeat the insights she provides on the many facets of the problems Maata is posed in this encounter and her possible motives and reasonings in addressing them. Rather, I wish to direct attention to the various modes of activity and meaning which characterize Maata's responses and how one leads to the next. Obviously, her initial problem is one of instrumentality- an important source of comfort, her place between mother's knees, has been usurped and must be reclaimed. She has only one real tool at her disposal in this endeavor, which is her dependent relationship to her mother, which has previously been established as a reliable resource for eliciting the outcomes she desires. But in this case, that avenue is closed, as her mother appears indifferent to her demands. Maata likely has no other real resources to draw on, not even her own physical strength, which has probably never gotten her very far before. There are essentially two options available to her: to continue on an increasingly distressing and futile

insistence on her “rights”, in contravention to the behaviors which have previously confirmed her status as adorable and loved (*kuluk-*); or, to exit the system in which she is operating and acquire new goals.

Again, playfulness acts in this case as the answer to an instrumental goal which seems out of reach or overly fraught with contradictions. The place of pride, where an adorable baby ought to be, is occupied; but to force the issue would negate the babyishness that legitimates her right to that place. Maata certainly does not understand the issue in such explicit terms, but it’s not likely that the dilemma is wholly opaque to her. And so she shifts the terms of the engagement, and finds an alternate aim which fulfills at least some of the conditions of her initial goal- the attention and affection of her mother, and the reaffirmation of her status as *kuluk-*. We can postulate that, in a very rudimentary way, she has “gone meta”; she has recognized that the desires that motivate her to seek her position between Mother’s knees can, in fact, be satisfied in other ways. The novel system which she generates is expressed in the context of a game in which she is enjoined to act out the role of a baby.

This notion might seem incongruous- a baby pretending to be a baby- but it is important for the events that follow. The game is not a simple reproduction of mundanely babyish behavior, but a stylized exchange which marks the behaviors and communications within it as arbitrarily constrained. In other words, by playing at being what she is, Chubby Maata is given a first hint of the possibility of being something else. In the same manner that mature game-players take on specific roles by

sitting at the chessboard or stepping onto the basketball court, and take them off again when they leave, Maata is being subtly instructed in the performative aspects of social identity- by acting *as if* she were a baby, with corresponding feedback from her mother, she is gaining both instrumental (workful) and stylistic (gameful) knowledge. In the former case, she learns (or re-emphasizes that) being a baby affords her certain privileges. In the latter, she is given a hint that those privileges are not inherent in her person, but rather in her status- her way of being, a way of being which is only of many possibilities. At a later point in her life trajectory, Maata will find that the ability to adopt and eschew social roles is a skill of great consequence; for now, it remains essentially experimental and experiential.

The game is elaborated and further dramatized as it shifts its focus from the Maata-mother dyad to the Maata-sister with the latter's playful attack on Maata. It is the same game, or at least a single sequence of games, from Maata's mother's perspective, but probably not Maata's. Her mother is still engaged with the humorous, affection-laden play of Maata's charming and endearing babyhood; for Maata, her nascent concept of babyhood does not yet provide for the association between (desirable) *kuluk*-ness and (undesirable) *silait*- [mindlessness] on which her mother's manipulations are premised. She is given a hint, though, which will eventually be elaborated into a more explicit understanding of the expectations placed on her as she matures: "Because you are a baby she is attacking you". In other words, there are consequences for being a baby, not all of them pleasant. For now, that point is unlikely to be the subject of much direct consideration by Maata, but the sensual aspects of this

play- the pleasant, pacific sensations of motherly love, the pleasantly agonistic sensations of dominating her sister, and the unpleasant, startling sensations of being attacked- are informing her pre-conscious understandings of herself and the world, to be drawn upon later in the many navigations and self-manipulations she will be called upon to make.

The game is further dramatized and re-figured as Maata's mother intervenes as an ally on the former's behalf, restraining her sister so that Maata can torment her at will- but not with complete license. Her suggestion to pull her sister's hair is mitigated by her mother to simply holding her down. One expects that the mother's interests here are instrumental: to protect her elder daughter from serious harm. But given that Maata's empathetic faculties are still quite rudimentary; her awareness of her physical capacity to harm is similarly untested; and is in any case not likely to be sympathetic to the usurping, aggressive person of her sister, the constraint likely appears as a sort of game-rule. At whatever level of consciousness she is aware of this, the (seemingly) arbitrary constraint imposed on her should be contributing to her sense of social "style"- the sensibility that, even in situations of conflict and aggression, moderation and restraint have social value. In other words, she is enjoined to behave *as if* she cares for her sister's feelings, and *as if* she did not want to truly hurt her- neither of which is probably the case in actuality. We might render her nascent schema as something like: "Sometimes force will get what you want from others [work], and can even be a pleasure in itself [play]. But one *ought not* to use force freely...? [game]" I use the ellipsis here to indicate that we cannot know whether the gameful meaning

Maata derives from this intervention is that of restraint, or that of resistance- there may be appended to her schema the clause "...when Mother is watching". To the extent that games make use of our agency, their meanings must necessarily be open-ended.

Her sister Rosi, on the other hand, has a very different dilemma to deal with: the raw discomfort of being restrained. From her point of view, I imagine, there is very little about this interaction that is gameful- the unpleasantness of her predicament is sufficiently intense so as to make the situation highly consequential. And so she begins to struggle in earnest. And as her efforts become more violent and earnest, Maata must react in kind in order to spare herself a reversal of fortunes. The balance between consequentiality and arbitrariness which I posited earlier has tipped toward the former, and the game-world collapses. It takes an even more consequential threat- that of strangers in camp- to end the battle between the sisters.

To summarize, the schematic description of Maata's experience might run something like: A work-frame (accessing a favored position) is frustrated, with the workful meaning that maternal affection is only conditionally available. A playful cognitive maneuver (initiating an imitation game) produces a new sensual arrangement that relocates the locus of the workful desire to a more abstract level (mother's attention)- the playful meaning is that there is more than one way to be *kuluk-*. The game addresses the dilemma raised by the work-failure by engaging the status-position (baby-*kuluk*) with which the desire is associated, specifying the question of meaning raised in the playful moment before- acting *like* a baby makes one *kuluk-*. The game is interrupted with a workful need (defense against Rosi's

attack). Maata's mother imposes a game-frame on the situation by arbitrarily constraining the actors (restrains Rosi physically, restrains Maata socially). Maata has a pleasantly meaningful experience in this game ("if I were powerful..."), while Rosi's is unpleasant ("if I were powerless..."), and ultimately unacceptable ("...and I am!"). Rosi breaks the "rule" of the game (that she cannot move) and symmetrical escalation ensues, resulting in the collapse of the game and the initiation of earnest, workful combat.

One can see how these various meaning-systems have particular interactions with one another. Instrumental desires generate problems which are not necessarily solvable in their own terms. Play serves as a means of problematizing these problems, making possible their resolution in different terms. Games are employed as mediations of more distant needs, ones which are not apparent in the moment to all of the actors and cannot be directly addressed through instrumental arrangements- rather, they are used to incite self-reflection and subjunctive thinking which set the stage for certain kinds of playfulness, such as role-taking, which will become instrumentally important later in life. When the sensual conditions of the game become overwhelming, the system reverts to a workful orientation, eliciting a playful redirection. This process of workful winnowing, playful evasion, and gameful stylization makes use of radically different varieties of meaning toward the production of a certain kind of person; one who can employ all these different sorts of meaning-making as an Inuit adult.

Clearly, there are a number of assumptions and speculations in my analysis here. Our access to Chubby Maata's mental states is highly mediated. But consider the

counter-propositions which might falsify my account. First, Maata's shifting of goal-states from seeking her favorite seating position to engaging her mother in imitation play *could* be a case of purely workful behavior, with the explicit goal of “being the most *kuluk-*”, in which case there would be no need to assert any playful meta-going. However, this would require us to attribute to Maata an awareness of others' perception of her as a certain kind of person, and a certain facility with the polyvalence of social roles, which I find highly unlikely. The fact that her mother makes the playful comment that “it is because you are a baby” that she is attacked suggests strongly that this is not the case; her mother is spontaneously instructing her in the nature of social roles, so she at least does not seem to think Maata possesses the cognitive equipment to unite the various affordances of comfort, attention, affection and so forth under the single heading of “baby-*kuluk*”.

It is also possible that in the holding-Rosi-down game, Maata is operating under workful premises- fulfilling an instrumental need for revenge under non-arbitrary conditions of restraint. I find this, too, unlikely. She is perfectly willing to engage in all-out struggle with her sister, as happens a moment later, still under her mother's eye. And furthermore, the fact that she offers a more violent kind of game as a suggestion, and readily assents to her mother's constraints, suggests to me that her goal is not to hurt her sister *per se*. Rather, it seems she is acting out a phantasmagorical scenario of not only dominance and power, but self-restraint, which is not beholden to a particular end-state.

I should also clarify that none of the transitions from one meaningful frame to

another are necessary or overdetermined. At any point in the sequence, the entire scenario could have ended in a tantrum, or simple pacific quiescence. My argument here is not that these meaning systems operate in mechanistic relationships to one another, but that when they do in fact arise in sequence, the information generated by one is fed into the next with particular sorts of “translations”.

Conclusion

The evidence of a single case study is obviously not sufficient to fully substantiate all the claims made here. Rather than to unequivocally “prove” my hypothesis, my hope is to have suggested a framework for productive questions about social scenarios. Thinking about the semiotic distinctions between game and play and work can, I think, be illuminating. If we need evidence for our frequent failures to properly distinguish these different sorts of meanings, we need only to look to the prevalence of interactions in which actors are forced to say things like: “I was just kidding around”. “You're not taking this seriously”. “You don't get it”. “Lighten up”. “This is no laughing matter”. “That's not fair”. Each case points to a scenario in which individual actors are entering under the premises of different meaningful frames. Ethnographers are not exempt from these sorts of misunderstandings, and an analysis of, say, a barn-raising or a public spectacle, that cannot distinguish between elements which are meaningful in terms of stylization versus consequences is likely to make serious interpretive errors. I offer this work as a preliminary step toward defining the salient differences which might provide for useful re-interpretations of ethnographic material.

This approach suggests a few further lines of inquiry. The balance I suggest between phantasmagorical consequentiality and liberating arbitrariness within the game sphere is ripe for more precise, perhaps even quantitative, definition. A clearer and more microscopically detailed understanding of how playful activity incorporates sensual material would strengthen the theory greatly; particularly, the way in which

sensual material would strengthen the theory greatly; particularly, the way in which putatively “unpleasant” sensations like fear are made into engrossing, entertaining experiences. A more systematic account of the “entropic” patterns which cause play to decay into game and game into work is another possibility. And of course, the topic of what I have called “ritual” and left aside for the time being begs to be addressed. If the ideas I have presented here can lead to further exploration of themes of meaning, pleasure, invention, and style, then I will have considered myself to have been a success; even, or rather, especially, if some playful thinker were to leap forward from my position and leave it behind entirely.

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