

# Impossible Autotelicity: The Political Negativity of Play

Justin A. Keever

## Abstract

*This essay is a manifesto against canonical studies of play that engages with a variety of texts within the game studies and play studies canon, in order to critique the a priori assumptions that are now built into those disciplines and the political ramifications of those assumptions. In canonical play scholarship, play's common theorization as "irrational" serves an ideological function of naturalizing whatever behavior or relation of power that play supposedly signifies (and what play signifies, of course, changes based on who is analyzing it). This ideological function relies on the accepted theorization of play as something intrinsically autotelic: autotelicity allows play to signify without being caught up in the structures of power that are inherent to signification. To demonstrate this ideology at work, this essay turns briefly to one of the foundational texts of game and play scholarship: Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga's interest in play is inseparable from his goal of naturalizing the rule of an aristocratic class; an ideal politics for Huizinga is a kind of spirited debate which serves tautological function in which the rulers reproduce their own right to rule through the procurement of honor through play. Huizinga conceives of an isolated sphere of politics, an apolitical politics, which resonates in contemporary game studies, particularly in Miguel Sicart's analysis of the activist game *Metakettle*, in which Sicart posits that the autotelicity of play can be used as a means of denying police the moral authority to arrest protesters. Sicart's analysis does not take in to account the basic facts that the mere occurrence of play does not depoliticize a political gathering, and that moral authority is of little consequence in police suppression political protest. *Metakettle*, as analyzed by Sicart, is ineffectual as a political tactic, but it does express future-oriented desire to be ungovernable. However, because play is always defined relationally by the negation of other terms, other terms which carry with them certain power relations, the truly autotelic form-of-life is beyond the reach of play. Rather, the autotelic nature of play is an illusory assertion of play's linguistic positivity, the mistaken notion that play is a thing-in-itself which is not invaded by its context, despite being defined by it. This understanding of play is, coincidentally, often critiqued in discussions of the "magic circle," which is the movement of autotelicity from play to games—an important connection this essay seeks to make clear and be critical of. This essay concludes by asserting that scholars must be deeply critical of the efficacious potential of play and must resist the temptation to privilege play as an inherently liberatory act.*

Play is a meaningless term: that is the thought that occurs in the moment of sublime confrontation with the immensity of play scholarship that Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) staged in the conclusion of his book *The Ambiguity of Play*. In the first half of the conclusion, Sutton-Smith presents his readers with a nearly two-page list that acts as a summary of the rhetorics of play that the rest of the book set out to detail. Contained within the main seven rhetorics are numerous theoretical specifications which are each reduced to a single word or miniscule phrase, and each assigned to a particular theorist (p. 219–20).

As a summary of Sutton-Smith's overall project, this list is intentionally useless. Rather, its purpose is affective, a sequence of terms whose meaning is inscrutable: unless, of course, you've read the book which precedes them. It is a moment designed to overwhelm the reader, to confront them with the immense variance of the theoretical work on play that leaves the concept so ambiguous. This is not, however, only a moment wherein Sutton-Smith confronts the reader with the grandiosity of his project—there is, appropriately, a deeper rhetorical strategy at play, one which Sutton-Smith sets up explicitly. The assignment of theorists to their work on play is also meant to demonstrate those scholar's central commonality: the way in which those scholars manipulate their respective rhetorics to “justify their own preoccupations with the different play forms” and in so doing “license their own authority over the kinds of play with which they are concerned” (Sutton-Smith, 2001, p. 216–17). This moment appears to be setting up a critique of overly-limiting disciplinary flag-planting, but after showing the reader his grand list, Sutton-Smith reveals that he is licensing his own authority, putting forth a rhetoric designed to act as an impossible synthesis of the rhetorics he has described thus far. The purpose of confronting the reader with the disorienting variance of the concept(s) of play is to allow Sutton-Smith to argue that “it is this variability that is central to the function of play throughout all species” (p. 221). Sutton-Smith argues that play is the actualization of the logic and process of evolution, an organism laying bare its capacity for variance that is ingrained into its neurological and cognitive development, and that this variability is motivated by the “everyday existentialism” that results from “our constant struggle for safety, approval, achievement, love, and even significance” (p. 221–8).

Sutton-Smith (2001) does self-reflexively put this notion of play as “adaptive variability” forth as a rhetoric (p. 221), a rhetoric which nonetheless makes a claim to an aspect of life that

---

### Author Biography

Justin Keever is a PhD Candidate in Visual Studies at the University of California, Irvine. At present, he primarily studies videogames, and his general research interests include new media, punk music, Autonomism, Semiotics, Post-Structuralism, and Structural Marxism, transient art, and Apocalypticism. He also works occasionally as a freelance writer, who was written about videogames for *Paste*, *Killscreen*, *Zam*, and *Heterotopias*. His contact information is as follows:

Email: [jkeever@uci.edu](mailto:jkeever@uci.edu)

Twitter: @JustAKeever

is prior to rhetoric, that which is pre-symbolic. In this contradictory move, Sutton-Smith reproduces a contradiction of Huizinga's play concept as something which is irrational yet signifies. Sutton-Smith does not align himself with Huizinga; on the contrary, he (rightfully) contains Huizinga within the rhetoric of power, recognizing Huizinga's play as being based primarily in agonism, and Huizinga would likely be opposed to Sutton-Smith's read of play as something which has its origins in biology. However, it seems as though the canonized work of Huizinga (whose citation when dealing with play in a scholarly mode is so commonplace as to seem obligatory) has infected Sutton-Smith's play concept.

Huizinga's (2016) account of play emerges as *a priori* assumption in the works of those who would consider themselves scholars of play *qua* play: play is voluntary, superfluous, free and not "ordinary" or "real life," autotelic, occurs within a spatiotemporal limit, has rules, etc. (p. 7–11). However, Huizinga's more consequential thesis that play is constitutive of culture bears two underlying assumptions: that play precedes culture, and that it bears/creates meaning. The fact that animals play is proof enough of the former for Huizinga, it is what he posits in the first sentence of *Homo Ludens*. What conclusions we may draw about the nature of men and animals, he describes a few pages down: "Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational" (Huizinga, 2016, p. 4). But play is also a "significant" function: "in play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something" (Huizinga, 2016, p. 1). The dualism of play established here, as something which is both irrational and signifying, is a contradiction only because the human process of signification which allows something to *mean* has been couched as a rational process: in addressing play, we must keep in mind that irrationality has been systematically excluded from language: perhaps this is why play remains so difficult to define. As Jacques Ehrmann (1968) posited, defining play "is at the same time and in the same movement to define reality and to define culture. As each term is a way to apprehend the two others, they are each elaborated, constructed through and on the basis of the two others." (p. 55). Within the linguistic system of negatives, play becomes definable only in relation to the social and the real, the latter not being an *a priori* but rather a contingent expression of a particular culture (Anchor, 1978, p. 90). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1979) notes a similar relativism that informs the relationship between play and reality: play is informed by an "individual's stance towards reality" (p. 20), a definition of playfulness that is made possible by the fact that the "primacy of one form of reality over another is based on bio-social, historical and ultimately political convenience, not on epistemological certitude" (p. 18). What becomes evident in these advancements and critiques of Huizinga's thought, as Anchor in particular notes by way of Ehrmann, is that play—when named as play—does not precede culture but is mutually constitutive with it. Play and the real are caught in a chain of signification, naturally rendering it impossible to name either as an origin point from which the other emerges. Play *means* because it is a signifier; we could say that what it signifies includes the irrational animal play that is not inherently subject to human linguistics. The animal becomes an origin, what Huizinga

might consider part of the “primaeval soil of play” (p. 5), which “play” as a term wants to capture but never can.

The irrationality of play, the way play literally transcends the human through the existence of animal play, explains Sutton-Smith’s turn to Darwinian language in his rhetoric of play. The co-existence of play in animals and humans is further proof positive, after all, of Darwin’s thesis that the difference between human and animal is only a matter of degree and not of essence. Darwin’s notion of the interconnectivity of human and animal is not unlike that of Jacques Derrida (2001) who opposed the term categorization of animal-in-general and who has written explicitly about linguistic play. Derrida, writing on the play of signification, conceives of play as central to being within the domain of linguistic practice. Play, for Derrida (2001), is “the disruption of presence,” i.e. the disruption of the fixed origin, the treatment of presence as “a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain” (p. 369). For Derrida (2001), the possibility of play can, and should, be conceived of as the basis for the interplay of linguistic presence and absence that constitutes being (p. 369). Ultimately there are two possible interpretations of play (and therefore of interpretation, structure, and sign) for Derrida: an interpretation that seeks to identify an origin which lies beyond play, or a rejection of the terms of an origin which affirms play and tries to pass beyond humanism (p. 369–70). As Souvik Mukherjee (2015) ably summarized: “play is itself always *in-play*” (p. 84). For Derrida, play is both productive (in the sense that it produces meaning) while offering the capacity to point beyond the human. Derrida’s imperative to move past a longing for the origin, to move beyond a structuralist bracketing, gives signification the potential to resonate beyond human rationality.

For Derrida, play is fundamental, but it is fundamental in a way that extends beyond itself. Derrida—who is not a play scholar, but a *playful* scholar—is able to sidestep an element of play which is taken up as fundamental in canonical play scholarship, a fundamental element which confers onto play an irreconcilable contradiction. That element is the autotelic nature of play. Huizinga’s conception of play as being bracketed off from ordinary life (the world of “toil and care, the calculation of advantage or the acquisition of useful goods” [Huizinga, 2016, p. 60]), interpolating “itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself” that begins and ends within a spatiotemporal limit inherently sets a limit on what play is capable of before it stops being play. Play “adorns” life, in Huizinga’s (2016) words; it is a “necessity” for life that contains a culture function but is nonetheless still separate from culture (p. 9). Play is, ironically, “an objectively recognizable, concretely definable thing,” whereas culture is solely a historical consideration. Play does not turn in to culture: Culture in its earliest phases has “the play-character” (Huizinga, 2016, p. 46). The competitive spirit which for Huizinga (2016) is also fundamental to play emerges in social contests, which in their seasonal repetition become ritualized, and in their animation of social groups becomes the starting point for institutions (p. 55). The problem built into Huizinga’s (2016) schema is that play is eventually overtaken by its child: as a society becomes more complex, it develops its own

systems of thought, doctrines, and regulations and loses sight of play (p. 75).

Such is the apocalyptic tragedy built into Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, that man's fundamental nature generates something exterior to itself that eventually overtakes that nature and marginalizes it, making it secondary to human life: man loses sight of its origin. As Robert Anchor (1978) noted, play, when it is conceived as an adornment of reality rather than imbricated with it, becomes inherently subtractable from reality (p. 91).

Therein also lies the deep conservatism built into Huizinga's schema of play and culture: a nostalgic longing for the contests of archaic societies. Play is central to Huizinga because of *what it signifies* for him. Sutton-Smith (2001) placed Huizinga within the rhetoric of power because *Homo Ludens* valorizes the indeterminate concepts of virility, nobility, virtue, and honor. The aristocratic class demonstrates their fitness to "fight and command" through contests:

In every archaic community that is healthy, being based on the tribal life of warriors and nobles, there will blossom an ideal of chivalry and chivalrous conduct, whether it be in Greece, Arabia, Japan or mediaeval Christendom. And this virile ideal of virtue will always be bound up with the conviction that honour, to be valid, must be publicly acknowledged and forcibly maintained if need be... Consequently virtue, honour, nobility and glory fall at the outset within the field of competition, which is that of play. The life of the young warrior of noble birth is a continual exercise in virtue and a continual struggle for the sake of the honour of his rank... That nobility is based on virtue is implicit from the very beginning of both concepts and right through their evolution, only the meaning of virtue changes as civilization unfolds. (Huizinga, 2016, p. 64)

Huizinga naturalizes nobility in this passage, puts forth the idea that a virtuous aristocracy is fundamental to a healthy community. As human culture advances beyond play, beyond these virtuous competitions which Huizinga longs for, the *a priori* significance of the ruling class is reduced. The inseparability of this elite virtue from the spatiotemporal limit of play becomes evident in Huizinga's (2016) description of the lost gentlemanliness of parliamentary debate, in which he briefly mourns the loss of "the spirit of fellowship" which would allow two political rivals to be friendly with one another even after an intense verbal political struggle, united as they were in their common interest in serving their country (p. 207).

It should be impossible to read such a sentiment and not hear contemporary calls for a return to civility in politics, a longing for the days when the citizenry at large was less divided, when a difference of political opinion was not considered a substantial moral divergence. That is to say, Huizinga's longing manifests now as a longing for a return to a popular conception of politics as neutral, as lacking substantial effects. Huizinga's political longing is a politics of the magic circle, politics as a form of play from which culture grows but which culture can only negatively infect. In assigning a play-element to parliamentary

democracy, Huizinga brackets the political process as being separate from the ‘ordinary’ world of labor and acquisition of goods and as such releases members of parliament from any responsibility to the citizenry at large. Huizinga (2016) privileges a way of being that is removed from real life via an emptying of the material—play is a “totality” (p. 3), “irreducible,” as Anchor (1978) summarized, “that can only be defined in terms of its opposite” (p. 78). Huizinga introduces an apophatic theology of play: Play is transcendent, Play is God. The contradiction has already been noted: play is in decline, and it is in decline because in being made transcendent play becomes removable from reality as such. Ehrmann (1968), by demonstrating the entanglement of play, culture, and reality, makes play immanent by returning it to the material. Robert Anchor (1978) summarized:

Ehrmann grants that play may produce nothing, but it does consume something: time, energy, and sometimes considerable property. And where there is consumption, there must be production some- where, which will have a great deal to do with how people play, how much they play, and how play influences and is influenced by the social order in which it takes place. Any valid theory, therefore, must perceive play in relation to the external world and recognize that both participate in the same economy. (p. 91)

In returning the forces of production and consumption to play, Ehrmann points to the material structure which underlies the noble games and chivalrous codes which Huizinga champions. Huizinga’s elision of this material base implicitly extends his cultural conservatism into a naturalization of hierarchical stratifications. By bracketing politics within his schema of play and culture, Huizinga allows politics to have ramifications outside itself while remaining free from scrutiny. The play of politics, its “gentlemanly” quality which frees it from the weight of morality, assigns to politics a primary function as a contest between elites, a game of debate which bestows onto the winner the honor of virtue that imbues onto the winner the right to rule—a right they had already exercised by having access to the parliamentary game in the first place. The parliamentary debate, when framed as a contest in this manner, takes on a tautological function in which the rulers reproduce their own right to rule through the procurement of honor through play. Contained within a spatiotemporal limit, politics becomes untouchable while touching the historically determined social world that lies beyond. An ideology of autotelic politics.

Miguel Sicart (2014) takes up this notion of autotelic politics from the inverse perspective, wherein play does not reproduce the authority of a ruling class but is instead the instrument by which dominating structures are resisted: for Sicart, “playing is freedom” (p. 18). In *Play Matters*, Sicart (2014) makes two key arguments (which he, helpfully, identifies himself): that play is appropriative<sup>1</sup>, and that play takes place in a particular spatial, temporal, and cultural context (p. 50–51). Sicart’s productive intervention (an intervention also made by Henricks [2015] and Sutton-Smith [2001]) is that play is allowed to resonate into culture without being sealed off from culture as a thing-in-itself. Despite this advancement, Sicart takes for granted that play is autotelic: the paradox of significance that results from political play—a kind of activism which is politically apolitical (and perhaps, more damningly,

apolitically political) that is best encapsulated by the case study of the game “Metakettle.” Metakettle is a response to the police tactic of “kettling” protestors, an act wherein police surround groups of protestors in order to break up larger demonstrations into “manageable” (more easily arrested) groups. When protestors are being kettled, a game of Metakettle may break out in response, in which the protestors break up into teams and each team attempts to surround the other teams in a manner that playfully mimics the police’s intimidation tactic. Sicart argues that Metakettle is only political in the context of being kettled; the autotelic nature of play means that the innate purpose of playing Metakettle is simply to play Metakettle. By playing, the protestors are no longer engaging in explicitly political activity, and if the surrounding police intervene in the game of metakettle, they are asserting the political nature of something innately apolitical, meaning that any action taken to break up the game would be an unwarranted use of force. “Once you start playing metakettle,” argues Sicart (2014), “the police have already lost—the game *and* their moral ground” (p. 75).

I need not cite a list of names of the numerous people killed and wounded by police, police who had given up their moral ground before making the decision to execute someone. Play is not a shield against state-sanctioned violence, and state violence does not correspond to moral authority. As a concrete example of play-as-political-act, metakettle is a failure. Sicart’s insistence upon the protection of protestors due to his own theorization of the internal logic of play is admirably idealistic, but nonetheless elides the way in which police are empowered by the state to manufacture their own justification for violence independent of the specific context in which they commit said violence. “The protestors were moving and shouting threateningly,” says the cop after beating the Metakettle player’s head in with a club.

As a material example of the freedom of play, Metakettle fails. However, the example of Metakettle can be productively interpreted as a future-oriented expression of political desires expressed through what Sicart calls playfulness. One can see in Metakettle a desire to be a politically illegible being, a desire to live in such a way as to be made unavailable to the law enforcement of the state through the performance of an activity that is contained within itself: that is to say, in Sicart’s Metakettle we can see a desire to remove oneself from a governing order by way of tying one’s existence up in an activity which governance cannot access, to make oneself an apolitical entity without the consent of the state.

As such, we might view Metakettle as a gesture to what Agamben (2014) calls the form-of-life, a conception of life that is made ungovernable through its destitution of power. The form-of-life is Agamben’s (2014) theorization of a way to resist the governmental construction of “bare life,” which is a non-political (rather than apolitical) kind of life which is constructed by the state as the kernel of life in itself, which the law protects. Bare life is what is excluded from politics, but it is an “inclusive exclusion”: bare life is implicated in politics from the start by being the subject of politics (Agamben, 2014, p. 65–66). In the face of this biopolitical formulation of the governable subject, the form-of-life emerges not through opposition and replacement of a political order but through the rendering of

economic, linguistic, religious and other such works inoperative. Inoperativity is not just refusal but a suspension of a work's 'economy', i.e., its utilitarian function: "if one eats, it is not done for the sake of being fed... if one walks, it is not done for the sake of going someplace" (Agamben, 2014, p. 69). The creation of the form-of-life of humanity is not based upon the creation of a new identity through the constituent violence of revolution, which replaces old law with new, but in the proletarian strike, which deposes law and in doing so totally transforms it. The form-of-life is a kind of being-in-act, destitution without refusal, "that which unrelentingly deposes the social conditions in which it finds itself living, without negating them, but simply using them" (Agamben, 2014, p. 69-72).

It's hard not to hear echoes of Sicart (2014) in the form-of-life, in the freedom implicit in being-in-act and the non-violent logic of destitution. In the form-of-life, Agamben (2014) conceives of an autotelic way of being, a life in which activities are performed for themselves and whose purpose is contained within themselves. What Sicart (2014) fails to take into account, what Huizinga's (2016) schema consciously excluded, is that the inverse of his second argument: The fact that play takes place in a context means that play-in-itself is always already contained within that context, imposed upon by it.

There is also a key slippage in the example of Metakettle which points us to a larger slippage of the same type that occurs frequently within game studies due to the way in which Huizinga (2016) is taken up canonically. The slippage is between "game" and "play." Reading the Metakettle example in *Play Matters* (Sicart, 2014), one may notice that it is introduced as "one of the most interesting political *games* ever made" [emphasis mine] (p. 74), but when explaining its political efficacy, Sicart refers to Metakettle as political *play*, not political structure, but political action (p. 75). This characterization of Metakettle is consistent with Sicart's (2011) interest in play's capacity to be appropriative, to the point where games themselves are *détourned* by their players: "Games structure play, facilitate it by means of rules. This is not to say that rules determine play: they focus it, they frame it, but they are still subject to the very act of play. Play, again, is an act of appropriation of the game by players." Metakettle is an appropriation of a police tactic and also a rule structure which facilitates play: Metakettle is game that is played, but it is also play in-itself.

The simultaneous and paradoxical distinction between games and play and the slippage between these two categories (which has occurred in this essay as well) has meaningful political ramifications because play and games often serve very different metaphorical political roles within game studies. You may notice that this essay refers more often to autotelicity than it does the magic circle, which has been mentioned by name once before now. The mention of the latter was itself a kind of slippage, which can occur because both autotelicity and the magic circle both refer to a kind of boundedness. However, the Magic Circle is essentially an adaptation of autotelicity, which refers to the bounded in-itselfness of *play*, to games. It is important to remember here that, as Jaakko Stenros (2012) reminds us, the magic circle as it is received in game studies presently does not derive directly from



Johan Huizinga (the term is sometimes mistakenly attributed to him). Rather, the term “magic circle” as defined as the spatiotemporal boundary of a game comes from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003), who use the magic circle “as shorthand for the idea of a special time and place created by a game” (p. 95). As Stenros (2012) points out, the passage this quote is taken from uses words like “enclosed” and “separate” when explaining the utility of the term, which then allowed the term to be used as a straw man which has been subject to consistent critique from the outset.

This critique, as Stenros (2012) helpfully summarized, often has to do with how the closedness of the magic circle elides the way in which games always take place within a context. Ian Bogost (2006) has critiqued the enclosedness of the magic circle, arguing that the implied entry and exit from the circle provides a two-way street in the preexisting ideologies of players and games meet (p. 135). Sybille Lammes (2006) and TL Taylor (2009) staged critiques of assumptions of the boundedness of games (the former mentioning the magic circle explicitly) by way of Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory. Taylor (2009) put forth that play must be viewed as an assemblage of human, nonhuman, conceptual, and material actors (p. 336). Anticipating Sicart’s (2011) critique of procedurality, Mia Consalvo (2009) positions herself against structuralist approaches to game studies, arguing that there is no magic circle, using Erving Goffman’s (1974) notion of frames and keys (as modified by Gary Alan Fine [1983]), suggesting that game structure and reality are different ways of framing life between which players rapidly switch when one frame intrudes on the other, meaning that gameplay is always contextual and dynamic (Consalvo, 2009, p. 414–16). Riffing on Ian Bogost (2006), Boluk and Lemieux (2017) put forth the idea of the “messy circle,” the porous membrane of the metagame, the environment – the context – in which games take place (p. 15).<sup>2</sup>

Boluk and Lemieux’s (2017) attempt to conceptualize the Metagame is particularly noteworthy because in doing so the two wage war on games (and videogames in particular) in the name of play:

Beyond both its etymology and various definitions, metagames are not simply self-referential games about games or recursive games inside games. They are not just games we play before and after, to and from, or during and between other games. They are not just games in, on, around, above, between, beside, below, or through games. Instead, the metagame expands, as a truly broad label for the contextual, site-specific, and historical attributes of human (and nonhuman) play. What the metagame identifies is not the history of the game, but the history of play. (p. 16).

Play is their protagonist and videogames their antagonist, the latter functioning as “the ideological avatar of play,” the appropriation of games and play that “conflates the fantasy of escapism with the commodity form and encloses play within the magic circle of neoliberal capital” (p. 8). The pair of writers are deeply critical of the idea that the magic circle is some kind of fictitious strawman, insisting instead that critiques of the magic circle that attempt to establish the porosity of its boundaries are inadequate: the magic circle, they argue, must

be viewed as an ideological construct (which conceals itself, as ideology does) in which the ontologized rulesets of videogames seal their players, naturalizing the agonistic ideals of contemporary capitalism (p. 281–282).

I do not wish to contest Boluk and LeMieux's (2017) argument that videogames perpetuate the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism, nor do I wish to contest their supposition that the magic circle remains a potent and prevalent way of thinking about games. What I *do* want to suppose, however, is that those very ideologies have infiltrated their argument by way of their choice of protagonist. For the duo, "play" is one and the same as Catherine Malabou's (2008) "plasticity" – that is, the brain's capacity to be both formable and formative. Just as humans make their own brains, humans are constantly making their own games. Following Bernard Suits' vision of workers as always covertly playing at being workers, the duo argue that humans are "constantly (and unconsciously) making metagames" (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017, p. 10). Boluk and LeMieux (2017) speak through plasticity to talk about play, and as such implicitly make a biological appeal to the primacy of play in a manner that echoes Sutton Smith and even Huizinga. Play is "pure possibility" (p. 8), play is the creative capacity of human beings to continually shape and re-shape themselves. Play is both adaptive variability and cultural creation.

In constructing play as a bastion of radical potentiality, Boluk and LeMieux (2017) tell a story in which play is in decline and must be recovered, a story which is ironically close to Huizinga's (2016). This is not to suggest that Boluk and Lemieux share Huizinga's political tendencies, but to demonstrate that there is a structure of thought that surrounds play that is unwittingly inherited from Huizinga, which persists even in the work of writers who wish to take the Dutch historian to task. And Boluk and LeMieux (2017) don't just inherit Huizinga's (2016) basic narrative of play in decline, they inherit play as a transcendent category. In articulating play as pure possibility, as something that in its ideal state is wholly unbounded, Boluk and LeMieux (2017) simply recapitulate play's transcendent boundedness. Plasticity/ play is the recoverable kernel of pure play, play's non-ideological avatar. Implicit in this vision of nonideological play is the very same separation from the material which Huizinga (2016) extolls: play becomes a primary creativity, an ideality which is constrained by the ideology of the magic circle. The magic circle is the translation of play's autotelicity, its boundedness, its for-and-in-itselfness, to games. In conceiving of an ideal play, a play which is merely constrained by ideology but represents horizonless creation, the ideology of the magic circle is covertly reconstituted as radical and resistive. Play as pure possibility presents a vision of play as being unaffected by the material, not subject to structures of power, free of organizations of hierarchy, as being pure anarchic creation. In being outside of everything, play recedes back into itself, into the enclosedness of autotelicity. The messy circle in which metagames take place is confronted in the name of an ideal recession from the world, back into the autotelic. Game scholars have collectively challenged the notion that games take place in a world apart, for themselves: Why is play spared this critical eye?

Braxton Soderman (in press) names a similar villain to Boluk and LeMieux in his upcoming critique of flow, setting his sights upon the neoliberal co-option of play. However, Soderman argues that we must be critical of play, that play has lost its autotelicity and that attempts to recover a pure play are always already ideological. Soderman argues, for instance, that the absorption of flow, an experiential manifestation of autotelic immersion in the act of play, is itself an experience that privileges individuality over sociality, as the flowing subject recedes into their own flow state.<sup>3</sup> The way in which this allows flow—and play—to be slotted into the individualist ideologies of neoliberal capitalism speaks for itself.

To take this a step further, I argue that the neoliberal co-option (and corruption?) of play is not just a co-option, but also an unveiling: It has revealed that play was *never* autotelic. There is no play-in-itself, because the form-of-life that would allow for autotelic activity in the first place is built upon destitution *without refusal*. To render inoperative without refusal is to escape the inclusive exclusion, a political formulation built upon linguistic negation. Play is a meaningless term, but it isn't play's fault. Play—the word—only means because it is caught within what Derrida calls the “system of differences”; it is defined in relation to its others. Play is play because it is not-work, it is not-culture, or it is not-productive,<sup>4</sup> etc. Bernard Suits (1977) said as much about play, arguing that it is something which is “inherently relative” (p. 121) to something else; as Emily Ryall (2013) summarized, play “can only be understood in a context against things that are not play” (p. 45). But the very relativity in which Suits (1977) situates play contradicts the very idea of autotelicity, which is for Suits play's necessary precondition for existence. Autotelicity cannot and does not survive relativity: meaning defined through relativity is intrinsically non-intrinsic. Again, we can turn to Ehrmann (1968): Play is constructed through and on the basis of the definition of reality and culture. Caught as it is within the linguistic hegemony of negation, play is always already embroiled in a context of symbolic relation which has made it not-autotelic.

Play's supposed constitutive irrationality—the evolutionary, animalistic quality ascribed to play by the likes of Huizinga and Sutton-Smith—is only ever being accessed through this framework: a kind of apophatic reasoning, a linguistic refusal that resists destitution. Sutton-Smith (2001), in attempting to locate the evolutionary basis of play, naturalizes competition as much as Huizinga (2016) does, ascribing to the capacity for variation a survivalist imperative that problematically links one's sociality to one's biology.

Ian Bogost (2016) attempts to offer us a way out of this dilemma in some of his later work. In *Play Anything*, Bogost posits that play “is not an alternative for work, nor a salve for misery. Play is a way of operating a constrained system in a gratifying way” (p. 5). *Play Anything* is a self-help text for finding the joy in capitalism and is knowingly written as such. Bogost wants to find the pleasure in taking objects as they are, taking commodity fetishism on its own terms and letting Wal-Mart goods speak to us as they appear to be, as though they were simply thrown into the world as they are. Play, for Bogost, is contained in the structure of objects—explicitly, he means their form, implicitly, the sociopolitical structure from

which they emerge. To justify his valorization of structure, Bogost performs a highly limited analysis of Derrida's "Sign, Structure, and Play", isolating a quote from the opening moves of Derrida's (2001) essay about the function of the center: "by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form" (as cited in Bogost, 2016, p. 93). The lesson pulled from this quote is the simple idea that the structuring center facilitates play, eliding the way in which the center is a function that in its very positing is supplemented and mediated. Moreover, the isolation of this quote conceals the ending of Derrida's (2001) essay, in which he posits a play that is not turned toward an origin, a play which does not occur with an eye toward its center (p. 370).

The lesson to take from reading Derrida in opposition to Bogost is that play need not be submission, that it can be something aside from an acquiescence to the way things appear to be. But playing is not freedom. The autotelic nature of play is a mythic, illusory assertion of the linguistic positivity of play, the mistaken notion that play is a thing-in-itself which is not invaded by its context, despite being defined by it. Play is contextual, Sicart (2014) himself writes: play happens in a tangled network of "people, things, spaces, and cultures" (p. 6). But play can overwrite context: that is its power of appropriation, its ability to "make almost any space... become a playground" (p. 7). Play, when taken as primary, which championed as an ideal thing, gains primacy over the situation in which it takes place. "But play is not detached from the world; it lives and thrives *in* the world," insists Sicart (p. 10). This attempt to return play to the world is only a repetition of Huizinga. Robert Anchor (1978) summarized, saying that for Huizinga "play is the ideal path to the vision of the sublime life because it is, so to speak, in the world but not of it" (p. 70). Play is refusal without destitution – appropriative play at best a manifestation of a desire for the freedom to be ungovernable: the desire to no longer be of the world.

But it is vital that we keep our gaze fixed upon the ways that we remain *of* the world, not merely in it. The desire for an unbound plasticity of being, free of ideological determination, is understandable, and admirable. But Metakettle fails not at the level of theory, but because the world is cruel, and our present distributions of power beget violence. No one should want to be the product of this world, and yet here we are. We have yet to throw the weight of history and language from our shoulders, these things which tie us irrevocably drag us back to the world that we'd rather recede from. Play, even at its closest to its sublime, transcendent form, only exists as a shadow of that form, and even so that shadow of sublimity is upheld by a material accumulation which itself serves as the foundation of play's safety. The sublime play of the ruling class is not the play most of us experience, but it is the play that the ideology of autotelicity continues to orient us toward: pure play, play in-itself, play as an act apart. It is that desire, the desire for an originary, transcendent, autotelic play that we must leave behind. The desire for pure play turns us away from the world, away from each other, away from the ways in which that we are always *of the world*, and not merely *in it*. As such, I would ask that we when we speak about play, we carry with us Anchor's (1978) thoughts on the methodological value of Huizinga: that the latter allow us to view play as a medium

through which we create and communicate meaning (p. 93). But I would also ask that we follow Soderman's forthcoming text and be critical of play. That we critique play-as-such, the kind of play that Boluk, LeMieux, and Sicart want to recover. That we view play with a productive suspicion and take seriously the idea that play cannot be redeemed. That play, in its capacity to signify, must always be read as a text. Most of all, that we remember that play is *always* of the material world, especially when it doesn't appear to be.

### Endnotes

1. Sicart's appropriative play is apparently a self-conscious appropriation of a similar definition offered up by Bernard Suits (1977), that one is playing if and only if one "has made a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes" (p. 124).
2. For more, see Stenros, J. (2012). In Defence of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play.
3. I cannot provide a page number for this citation as the page range for this argument is subject to change in the final version of this book.
4. As asserted by Roger Caillois (2001) when he writes that "A characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art. At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill" (p. 5–6).

### References

- Agamben, G. (2014). What is a destituent power? *Environment and Planning D: Space and Society*, 32, 65–74.
- Anchor, R. (1978). History and play: Johan Huizinga and his critics. *History and Theory*, 17, 63–93.
- Bogost, I. (2016). *Play anything*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bogost, I. (2006). *Unit operations: An approach to videogame criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Boluk, S. & LeMieux, P. (2017). *Metagaming*. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.

- Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Csikszentmihaly, M. (1979). Some paradoxes in the definition of play. In A. Cheska (Ed.), *Play As Context: 1979 Proceedings of The Association for The Anthropological Study of Play*. West Point, NY: Leisure Press.
- Derrida, J. (2001). Sign, structure, and play in the discourse of the human sciences. In *Writing and Difference*, (A. Bass, Trans.; pp. 351–70). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ehrmann, J. (1968). Homo ludens revisited. In J. Ehrmann (Ed.), *Game, Play, Literature* (pp. 31–58). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Fine, G. A. (1983). *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Henricks, T. S. (2015). *Play and the human condition*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Huizinga, J. (2016). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. New York, NY: Angelico Press.
- Lammes, S. (2006). Spatial regimes of the digital playground: Cultural functions of spatial identification in post-colonial computergames. In *Proceedings of Mediaterr@:Gaming Realities. A Challenge for Digital Culture* (pp. 236–243).
- Mukherjee, S. (2015). *Video games and storytelling: Reading games and playing books*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ryall, E. (2013). Playing with words: Further comment on Suits' definition. In E. Ryall, W. Russell, & M. MacLean (Eds.) *The Philosophy of play* (pp. 44-53). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Salen, K. & Zimmermann, E. (2003). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sicart, M. (2011). Against procedurality. *Game Studies*, 11.

- Sicart, M. (2014). *Play matters*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Soderman, B. (in press). *The flowing subject (Working Title)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stenros, J. (2012). In defence of a magic circle: The social and mental boundaries of play. *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference*. Tampere, Finland, June 6-8.
- Suits, B. (1977). Words on play. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 4, 117-131.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (2001). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, T.L. (2009). *The assemblage of play*. *Games and Culture*, 4, 331-339.