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Play and space – towards a formal definition of play

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The aim of this article is to present a formal definition of the aspect of play generally known as ‘make-believe’. ‘Make-believe’ is defined in relation to theory of place and *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world as presented by Martin Heidegger in *Being and time*. From this point of view ‘make-believe’ can be defined as a uniform and situational spatial dyad where being is doubled, characterized by the presence of the physically absent. I will apply this definition after a survey of central and influential aspects of the history of the theory of play to demonstrate its relevance for a formal definition of play.

Keywords: theory; play; make-believe; place; spatiality; being

Introduction

Understanding a heterogeneous phenomenon like play often relies upon the eyes of the beholder, a factor Brian Sutton-Smith clearly illustrates in *The ambiguity of play* (1997/2001). Sutton-Smith lists seven rhetorics, each of which reflects a specific view of play. The general point is that research results are determined by the rhetoric that is chosen and applied. Following Sutton-Smith’s line of thought, we can say researchers work with a correspondence between ways they think about their subject matter, how they address their field of research and the outcome of the research. The question of what and how to understand or even define play therefore becomes difficult.

This article does not dispute Sutton-Smith’s findings or their general and far-reaching research implications. Instead, it seeks to propose another way of addressing and understanding play that seems to have escaped the analytical matrix presented by Sutton-Smith’s seven rhetorics. I propose a different way of shaping the analytical matrix and another theoretical approach towards research of ‘make-believe’. In order to do so, it is necessary to expand upon those ways of thinking previously employed by research of play. This undertaking will begin by distinguishing play from games to present the problematic affinity between the two. This is followed by an analysis and formal description of how aesthetic theory from German romanticism has come to be shaped. This in turn will lead to an explanation of the relevance of theory of place and of Heidegger’s philosophy of being, at which point their fruitfulness in relation to a definition of play should become apparent.

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This article is primarily concerned with theoretical research. It aims at presenting a formal description of play from an angle that is normally regarded as ‘make-believe’. The primary aim of this article is to propose a way of analysing, describing, and understanding ‘make-believe’ in play against the background of the expanding field of research into the phenomenon of place (Agnew, 1987; Augé, 1995; Blum, 2003; Casey, 1997, 1998, 2009; Cresswell, 2004; Lefebvre, 2012; Relph, 2008; Tuan, 1991, 2011; Soja, 1996). Embedded within the heterogeneous research field of place there exists research approaches that are influenced by divergent perceptions of phenomenology. In contrast to these, this article will draw upon Martin Heidegger’s thoughts as they are formulated in the first part of *Being and time* (2010 [1927]). Theory of place and Heidegger’s phenomenology converge in Jeff Malpas work *Heidegger’s topology* (1999, 2008), which constitutes a significant source of inspiration for the ambitions espoused by this article.

To sum up, this article aims to present an epistemology of play based on spatiality and being (Dreyfus, 1991). Hopefully, this theoretical work will contribute to the understanding of make-believe in particular and play in general.

Play and games – a complex opposition?

In *half-real* (2005) Jesper Juul makes a distinction between play and games. In French, Spanish, or German the distinction is absent while in English it is unclear since *play* is both a noun and a verb (you *play* a game), whereas *game* is mostly a noun. In English, it is common to see games as a subset of *play*. ‘Scandinavian languages have a stronger distinction with *leg* = play and *spil* = game with verbs for both – you can play play (“*lege en leg*”) and game game (“*spille et spil*”), so to speak’ (p. 29). In a Scandinavian context it is less obvious that games are a subset of play. As Juul rightly points out, this ambiguity often manifests itself in the research literature of both play and games (e.g. computer games).

Neither Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1949 [1938]) nor Roger Caillois in *Man, play and games* (2001 [1958]) makes clear distinctions between play and games. Huizinga’s definition of play ranges from an activity outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is without material interest and no profit can be gained by it. In *Truth and method* (2006) Hans George Gadamer describes play (*spiel*) as something that grabs participants from the ‘outside’, thereby placing emphasis on play as something larger than the particular subject. Play comes close to being a transcendental concept. Like Huizinga, Gadamer perceives play as free of material interest. Instead, play has primacy ‘over the consciousness of the player’ (p. 105). Play brings itself into ‘existence’ in the act of playing. This leads Gadamer to characterize playing as the central aspect of play. Play is about play itself. It is not the participants who play. It is play that plays through the participants or, as Gadamer puts it, ‘all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players’ (106).

Huizinga is less radical. In his definition, play constitutes its own borders, establishing a ‘circle’ where time and space act differently from outside those borders. Activity inside the bounds of play is rules based and executed in an orderly manner. This description has later been extended to the magical circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). It resembles what we normally associate with games. The very last part of Huizinga’s definition diverges from gameness and turns towards what is normally associated with play. Huizinga writes that play promotes ‘social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means’ (Huizinga, 1949, p. 13). This kind of behaviour is not uncommon among children.

Huizinga’s definition can be said to be unclear on the distinction between play and game. The first part of his definition seems to create an overlap between ‘play’ and ‘game’, while the middle

stresses ‘game’ which in turn is in contrast to the last part, which seem to put emphasis on ‘play’. Overall Huizinga stresses ‘agôn’ or an agonistic formation or principle inherent in bringing about culture. Agôn seems to be closely associated with competition. This leaves the reader with an uneasy sense of confusion as to what it is exactly that Huizinga means by play. Is it playing or gaming? Or does he simply sometimes mean ‘play’ and other times ‘game’? The question remains unanswered.

The same lack of clarity can be found in Caillois’ definition. He, too, stresses play as a free activity, separate in time and space, uncertain, unproductive, rule driven, and make-believe (Caillois, 2001, pp. 9–10). These six qualities are, as Caillois writes, ‘purely formal. They do not pre-judge the content of games’ (p. 10). He continues to categorize games into four main types. Each type is classified according to whether competition (agôn), chance (alea), simulation (mimicry), or vertigo (ilinx) is dominant. The four types of game manifest themselves on a continuum between two contrasting attitudes or styles (Mäyrä, 2012) of play. Caillois call them *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* constitutes ‘turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety’ (p. 13), while *ludus* absorbs the frolicsome and impulsive with discipline and convention.

Caillois thereby distinguishes between general and formal elements, which, taken together, constitute a common denominator of how to define games. His classification of games and his set of two styles of play attitudes do not change the fact that if make-believe (mimicry) were to be left out of the definition, the definition would stress gameness and not play. Introducing make-believe, as Huizinga does when he includes social groupings surrounding themselves in secrecy and disguising themselves from the common world to underscore their difference, also introduces confusion to the distinction between game and play.

A brief look at game definitions

Further clarification of divergent perceptions of play and games can be achieved through an investigation of game definitions. However muddled these definitions tend to be, they illustrate how games are currently being understood. By highlighting games, it should become apparent that play is something different.

In *Reality is broken* (2011), Jane McGonigal outlines *four* defining traits of all kinds of games ranging from board-games to sport to computer games. McGonigal tries to encircle what a game is, regardless of its medium or level of reality.

The *first* trait relates to the player’s *goal*. What outcome is the player working to achieve? According to McGonigal, having a goal instils a certain feeling in the player; it ‘provides players with a *sense of purpose*’ (p. 21). The *second* trait is rules. They limit or structure how players can achieve their goal. They ‘*unleash creativity and foster strategic thinking*’. The *third* addresses the feedback systems, which communicates how far from or close to players are from achieving their goals. These serve ‘as a *promise* to the players’ and this ‘provides *motivation* to keep playing’. The *fourth* trait touches upon aspects found in Huizinga, Caillois and Gadamer. It is *voluntary participation*. The freedom to enter or leave a game underscores the fact that ‘intentionally stressful and challenging work is experienced as *safe* and *pleasurable* activity’.

McGonigal finds that all four traits are inherently present in Bernard Suits’ definition of games. Suits writes,

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [preludory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. (Suits, 2005, pp. 54–55)

Or as the short version goes, ‘playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles’ (p. 55).

The definition can be illustrated using golf. The golfer has a clear goal: get the ball in the hole. It is done by following the rules of the game. They, as McGonigal rightly points out, structure the obstacles. The result is that the golfer engages in unnecessary obstacles when trying to get the ball in the hole. The easy way to accomplish this task would be to just take the ball, walk to the hole, and drop it in. Of course there is no challenge in that. Therefore, the said obstacles present challenges to overcome. Taken together, the golf scenario sums up all four traits of what games are all about.

Game designers perceive games a little differently. Fullerton (2008) stresses that a game is ‘a closed, formal system that engages players in structured conflict and resolves its uncertainty in an unequal outcome’ (p. 43). The emphasis is on games as closed systems that use rules to structure an artificial conflict that does not, always have the same outcome. If it did it would not be a game. Fullerton takes into account the fact that games are ‘a closed, formal structure’ consisting of more than one player.

Schell (2008) proposes an even shorter definition of games. ‘A game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude’ (p. 37). Here Schell does not only draw on Caillois’ *paidia* and *ludus* distinction and Suits’ *lusory attitude*, he also understands games as a *system* with a player *experiencing* the game system. Inherent to his definition Schell finds that games are entered voluntarily, have goals, conflicts, rules, can be won or lost, are interactive, create their own internal value, engage players, and finally that games are closed, formal systems.

When all these attempts to define games are listed in this way it becomes apparent that play is something different from games although they share traits. Both of them claim that they are entered freely and voluntarily. Make-believe is absent in all game definitions except from Huizinga and Caillois. Goals, challenges (obstacles), structured conflict, rules laid out in advance, and uncertain outcomes that favour one part over the other is not what we normally associate with play. Still it is often assumed play and game share a connection, that they are closely related to each other. The next paragraph will take a short look at some of these assumptions.

The relation between play and games

In *Toward a Ludic architecture: The space of play and games* (2010), Steffen P. Walz argues that ‘play is the foundation of a game, and that neither can exist without the other’ (p. 22). Expanding on Buytendijk’s (1933) perception of play as rooted in movement, Walz understands play as based in movement, rhythm, and pleasure. Play takes place through movement. A dynamic created by balance between tension and termination. Within movement there must be a repetitive to-and-fro action between one player and another party. The other can be a ball, a chess piece, or person. Rhythm establishes itself in the movement exercised between players. According to Walz, movement and rhythm involve intensity, pace, and pattern during the amplitude between tension and termination (2010, pp. 44–45).

Buytendijk is focused on attitude. What it consists of and how it takes place. Like Huizinga, Caillois and Buytendijk, Walz makes no clear differentiation between play and games. Buytendijk’s attention to tension and termination is reminiscent of emotions connected with overcoming obstacles in the form of challenge and conflict. The same goes for his inclusion of repetition and to-and-fro. Repetition is mainly found in games and especially in relation to game procedures – how to play the game – where players execute the same movements over and over again. Rhythm itself is embedded in games. All this is underscored when Buytendijk illustrates his points using examples taken from playing with a soccer ball or showing how the movement of chess pieces on

the board also displays rhythm. Buytendijk addresses an important feature of play – the formation of an attitude of play – but it seems to be play in relation to games.

Walz addresses the pleasure of play, a feature Graeme Kirkpatrick in *Aesthetic theory and the video game* (2011) associates with modern aesthetic theory and play. Here play is a key feature in the design of pleasurable experiences. Like Walz, Kirkpatrick stresses the player's experience of play. Or, to be more specific, feelings associated with the activity of playing. Kirkpatrick links German idealism and the experience of play and finds that in play we experience 'order and finality [and] pattern that pleases us because of its perfection' (p. 23). Later Kirkpatrick, inspired by what he calls the Scandinavian school of ludology, writes, 'ludology's focus on play structured by ludic form means that it correctly identifies the heart of the issue as far as video games are concerned' (p. 79). The quotation echoes Walz's description of the relation between play and games. Both conclude that playing a game is structured play. This means that games represent structure while play presents engagement. In that sense both Kirkpatrick and Walz speak about play as particular *attitude* that comes into being when playing a game. Preoccupied with investigating the attitude of playing games, they forget to address what play looks like without a game present. Play exists outside the structure of games. It has its own place. Investigating the attitude in playing games is relevant. It is indeed highly relevant, as Kirkpatrick correctly points out when he links his study of play to the attitude of play in relation to computer games. This leaves the question of how to understand play outside the realm of game.

The aim of this article is to present a definition that describes play as phenomenon in its own right with its own inherent structure, not solely as an attitude in relation to playing games or a particular attitude when actually playing.

German idealism – aesthetics and play

To fully explain play outside the realm of game structure, it is necessary to investigate prior perceptions of play, especially the epistemologies embedded in discussions of play. In German idealism, by which Kirkpatrick is influenced, play was regarded as having a crucial impact in the formation of a complete human being. Inspired by Emmanuel Kant's *Critique of judgment* (2008), Friedrich Schiller writes in *On the aesthetic education of man* (1795/2004) about play as a unifying impulse. Schiller's thinking is, as Kirkpatrick correctly states, preoccupied with concepts such as beauty, perfection, and sublimity.

Schiller's aesthetics of play demonstrates a particular way of thinking in which he identifies two contrary forces, which he calls impulses. These impulses urge or propel man in opposite directions. The *first* is the sensuous impulse, which 'proceeds from the physical existence of Man or from his sensuous nature, and is concerned with setting him within the bounds of time' (p. 64). When Man is governed by the sensuous impulse his personality is extinguished. Man is not himself when solely in the grasp of the sensuous impulse. The *second* is the formal impulse, which proceeds from Man's 'rational nature, and [it] strives to set him at liberty, to bring harmony into the diversity of his manifestation' (p. 66). When man is governed by the formal impulse, all barriers disappear. In the grasp of the formal impulse, Man is just as hindered from becoming himself.

Schiller thereby describes two opposing impulses – one with limitation and one without, or one of mutation and another of immutability. Both these impulses 'exhaust the conception of humanity' (p. 67). To mediate the dynamics of the two opposing impulses, Schiller proposes a unifying or formative impulse, which he provisionally calls 'the *play impulse*' (p. 74). This formative impulse correlates the former two opposing impulses and can, according to Schiller, 'set man free both physically and morally [and] bring form into the material and reality into form.' (pp. 74–75)

Schiller not only presents intriguing ideas about play, but he also demonstrates a way of thinking, when addressed formally, that is in accordance with the epistemological structure in German idealism. Schiller's way of thinking consists of two opposing impulses and a formative and liberating third impulse. This triadic construction of thought can be traced in both Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget's work. In Freud's speculative work *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1987) the same epistemological triadic structure shows itself. In Freud's perspective man finds himself at the centre of two opposing instincts often relayed as Eros and Thanatos, the life and death instincts. These instincts should, generally speaking, be understood as two diverging desires. Eros constitutes a forward direction towards instant fulfilment of desire, while Thanatos drives man in the opposite direction towards stillness through postponement of satisfaction. Freud writes, 'Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a 'life instinct' in opposition to the 'death instinct' [and] these two instincts [are] struggling with each other from the very first' (p. 73). In the tension between the two instincts reality unfolds itself as retardation or postponement of death (Juel Larsen, 2012).

The formal design of Freud's triadic thought structure is closely related to the epistemological structure of Schiller's aesthetics and to German idealism in general. Schiller and Freud's structure of thinking appears in expanded form in Jean Piaget's thinking. Like Schiller and Freud before him, Piaget operates with a triadic thought structure in which a dynamic of two opposing positions (assimilation and accommodation) struggle before ideally finding a third position – equilibrium between the two. Piaget's ideal is his understanding of objective reality closely related with positivism. Following Piaget, learning is associated with accommodation – change in order to understanding reality – while play is linked to assimilation – organizing reality to serve the purpose of the subject.

This becomes clear in *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood* (1962) where Piaget writes,

unlike objective thought, which seeks to adapt itself to the requirements of external reality, imaginative (make-believe) play is a symbolic transposition which subjects things to the child's activity, without rules or limitations. It is therefore almost pure assimilation, *i.e.*, thought polarized by preoccupation with individual satisfaction. (p. 87)

The thought pattern in Piaget's reflections oscillates between two opposites – assimilation and accommodation – in which 'every act of intelligence is an equilibrium' (p. 87). Like Schiller and Freud, Piaget's thinking is embedded, from a formal perspective, in a triadic structure of thought that rests upon the dynamic power of two opposing positions. The thought patterns presented can be formally described as relationships between two opposing positions, which determine the outcome of the third and formative position.

The paradigm of progression

Unlike Schiller and Freud, Piaget introduces a temporal dimension in the triadic thought structure. He presents *stages* in the development of man. Piaget thereby seems to tap into or draw on similarities with biological views of the evolution of man as they can be found in the writings of Charles Darwin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Herbert Spencer's *Education* (1861).

Piaget's introduction of temporal progression changes the perception of play from dialectics of German idealism. Now play displays characteristics in accordance with certain particular stages – six all together. Play changes over the course of the individual's development, so to speak. As the quotation above clearly demonstrates, Piaget is preoccupied with understanding play in relation to satisfaction or, as he writes,

assimilation was no longer accompanied by accommodation and therefore was no longer an effort at comprehension: there was merely assimilation to the activity itself, *i.e.*, use of the phenomenon for the pleasure of the activity, and that is play. (p. 92)

This quotation not only reflects Piaget's view of play as oriented towards pleasure and void of any ambition to comprehend objective reality, but it also reveals how Piaget regards play activities as goals in themselves, which correspond with the aesthetics of German idealism. Piaget can be said to reflect thought patterns from German Idealism while simultaneously including temporality in his theory of play.

Vygotsky (1978), on the other hand, reflects on play independently of German idealism. He subscribes to the temporal paradigm of progression when trying to understand play. But unlike Piaget's debasing of play, Vygotsky finds the importance of play paramount to the development of the individual.

Vygotsky is opposed to the notion of understanding play as pleasure for its own sake. Instead he considers play in relation to perception and language. Vygotsky investigates play as motivated by satisfying needs directed towards what is absent. Vygotsky writes, 'the preschool child enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized, and this world is what we call play' (p. 93). Play thereby emancipates the child 'from situational constraints' (p. 99).

Vygotsky's theory of play also operates with transition of meaning. This is very important. At first the child is unable to think of a horse without looking (perception) at a horse. Later the child uses the stick as a replacement for the horse. As Vygotsky writes, 'the stick becomes the pivot for detaching the meaning of "horse" from the real horse' (p. 98). Transfer of meaning occurs when the child assigns meaning by substituting the real horse with an object – in this case a stick.

Transfer of meaning not only emancipates the child from situational constraints, but it also leads to nothing less than the development of *abstract thought*. Without the transfer of meaning, abstract meaning would not be possible.

Vygotsky's understanding of play thereby finds itself deeply embedded in the paradigm of progression. The importance of play is radically different from Piaget's notion of pure distorted assimilation with pleasure for its own sake. Or as Piaget writes about make-believe play, 'there is no accommodation of the schemas to objective reality, but distortion of the latter for the purpose of the schema' (Piaget, 1962, p. 100). From Vygotsky's perspective, play is far more serious. Nothing short of abstract thought hinges on the phenomenon of play.

Where Vygotsky was concerned with play in the developmental history of the individual, Bateson (1987) is concerned with play as the phenomenon that propelled the evolution of human language. Without play, humans would communicate with signals like monkeys in the zoo, which by the way is where Bateson's understanding of play originated.

In his article *A theory of play and fantasy* from *Steps to an ecology of mind* (1987), Bateson describes play as dependent on the exchange of the metacommunicative message: 'This is play' (p. 185). According to Bateson, the message is important, since it implicitly states, "These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be de-noted by those actions which these actions denote." The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite' (pp. 185–186). Just as the monkeys in the zoo, humans meta-communicate the message 'this is play' to signal when we play.

Bateson is concerned with the denotative aspect of language, which apparently is far more complex than anticipated. To illustrate the complexities in the evolution of language, especially the denotative aspect, he uses Korzypski's map-territory relation. Bateson writes,

a message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes ('The word "cat" cannot scratch us'). Rather, language bears to the objects which it denotes a relationship comparable to that which a map bears to a territory. (p. 186)

He therefore proposes that denotative communication only became possible *after* the development of complex sets of metalinguistic rules that handle how words are related to objects. And these metalinguistic rules are rooted in play. Bateson tentatively concludes,

It appears from what is said above that play is a phenomenon in which the actions of ‘play’ are related to, or denote, other actions of ‘not play’. We therefore meet in play with an instance of signals standing for other events, and it appears, therefore, that the evolution of play may have been an important step in the evolution of communication. (p. 186)

Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bateson are all influenced by the paradigm of progression, whether they address it in relation to individual development or as the temporal background that propels the evolution of language. To further substantiate how understanding play is rooted in the paradigm of temporality, I will give a brief description of how play is understood in a Scandinavian context.

Play in a Scandinavian context

Developmental psychology enjoys a strong presence in Scandinavia. Generally it addresses play as a driving force for something besides play itself. In the Scandinavian tradition, play is often viewed as a *function* in the development of the individual. In one branch of developmental psychology play is regarded as a platform for dealing with the emotional drama of everyday life. Another branch, which by the way is indebted to Piaget, views play as the recognition of the surrounding reality. Yet a third branch sees play as the dynamo for social development in which understanding of oneself and others is of primary concern.

In developmental psychology there is a common denominator in the understanding of play that sees it as an ‘instrument’ which is used to see how the child is following the developmental schema. Metaphorically speaking, play becomes a landscape for the diagnostic eye to decipher the general state of the child’s development.

In contrast to the dominance of developmental psychology, a culturally oriented (Cosaro, 1985) view of play has begun to emerge. It is preoccupied with adopting the child’s perspective to understand why children play *here and now* (Andersen & Kampmann, 1996; Kampmann, 1997; Knudsen & Kampmann, 2009).

The cultural perspective investigates how children play from a vertical as well as horizontal view. The vertical view follows Sutton-Smith’s (1979) observations on how girls play in groups. They are organized ‘as coaches, as players, as co-players, and as fans’ (p. 231). This illustrates the vertical aspect of social organization of play.

Andersen and Kampmann (1996) add a horizontal dimension in which play consists of *both* a negotiating phase and a period of deep play. In the negotiating phase children establish a hierarchy of power to determine who is in charge and which child is to follow or spectate. Together the negotiating phase and the period of deep play constitute a structure of play.

Play can take on many shapes within this structure. One Scandinavian researcher proposes play as an oscillation between *mimesis* and *mythos* (Rasmussen, 2002). *Mimesis* should be understood as a dramatic presentation, while *mythos* constitutes generation of story. According to this view, *mimesis* and *mythos* create two different yet interconnected layers of play that define the dramatic and epic play. In epic play, the participants are engaged in an ongoing interaction between being themselves and being somebody else. In dramatic play, players are engaged in making proclamations that orient the direction of the play activity. This view deals with play as oscillation between telling stories and acting out these stories. This line of thinking touches upon transitions between fantasy and reality. An aspect of play Rasmussen further elaborates in *The virtual world of toys* (2003) explains how toys are ‘open’ for *transformations* that redefine their objective status. This follows Vygotsky’s transfer of meaning when children make a stick become a horse, a view Kendall Walton also shares in *Mimesis as Make-believe* (1990). But instead of focusing on the transformation in itself, Walton sees objects as prompts for imagination. Walton writes that objects ‘*prompt* imaginings; they are *objects* of imaginings’ (p. 21). Vygotsky,

Rasmussen, and Walton thereby present three different views on ‘make-believe’. From Vygotsky’s perspective ‘make-believe’ constitutes play; Rasmussen is concerned with how children transform everyday objects into something else; while Walton sees external objects as prompts for our imaginings.

To sum up, first I investigated the difference between play and games to arrive at an understanding that games are often understood as structured play. Such a view does not, of course, describe play in all its complexity. It addresses an attitude that can be found when playing games. Outside the realm of games, play is primarily understood in terms of what I have called the paradigm of progression. It addresses play from the perspective of temporality. Often play is seen as a *function* for something else. This may be as a step in the evolution of language (Bateson), a prerequisite for abstract thought (Vygotsky) or as an element in the developmental history of the child (Piaget), as a natural strategy for developing emotional responses, recognizing the world or understanding adult culture. Or this may be, as is often the case when development psychology tries to understand the meaning of play especially make-believe, by stressing its importance in relation to (1) development of language, consciousness, creativity, and theory of mind (Kaufman, 2012; Singer & Singer, 2005, 2013), (2) intellectual development and the acquisition of symbols (Fein, 1978), or (3) the link between cognition, emotional, and social development and the relationship to understanding the self and the other (Paley, 2009a, 2009b).

This very brief summary shows how the temporal ‘speed’ of progression has slowed down. It has been scaled back from Bateson’s broad view to concentrate on aspects like transformations (Rasmussen/Walton) in particular situations.

Taken together these perceptions of play are concerned with the *content* and the *function* of play and less with a formal description of how play is structured. To address formal aspects is to disregard content and function in order to provide a description that depicts the structural ‘shape’ or structure of play. Such a structure appears when, as stated in the abstract and in the introduction to this article, play is approached through theory of place and Heidegger’s philosophical investigation of being.

Play as a spatial dyad

When make-believe in play is addressed from the theoretical catalogue of theory of place, the analytical point of view is concerned with the spatial *shape* of make-believe and how such a shape can provide insight into the understanding of play. The question is how is make-believe in play spatially shaped?

The short answer is that make-believe presents itself as a spatial dyad. A dual structure comprises two separate yet interconnected spatial layers. The *first* layer constitutes the actual locality in which play unfolds, whether it be indoors or outdoors, *with* toys or *on* toys in the playground. Meaningful content assigned to the ongoing activity constitutes the *second* layer. It can be argued the assigned content is analogous to mental augmentation or expansion of the ongoing activity. I refrain from using words like ‘pretend’ or ‘imagined’ in order to avoid misunderstandings. Instead I want to emphasize the general point; the two layers in the spatial dyad form a uniform situational activity.

The formal description of play as a spatial dyad is especially useful when trying to determine whether or not an activity can be defined as play. With this description in mind it is possible to distinguish between an activity of *climbing* on a climber and *playing* on a climber. If you climb on a climber without mental augmentation, the activity lacks a layer of meaning that can define it as play. Following this article’s understanding of play, the activity would not be play. It would simply be the activity of climbing on a climber. Which, by the way, can be great fun.

If, on the other hand, the individual, while climbing on the climber, pictures him or herself as climbing a mountain, the activity should be characterized as play. The same goes if the individuals picture themselves as being mountain climbers and picture non-existing robes during the act of climbing on a climber. The point here is that the structural doubling of spatiality during the activity constitutes a demarcation line between play and non-play.

It is important to emphasize that understanding play as a uniform situational spatial dyad constitutes a formal description and as such it has neither relevance nor concern for the specific content of the particular play scenario. From this point of view, it makes no difference how climbing on a climber is augmented. Players can be mountain climbers, soldiers, wives, husbands, sisters, brothers, racing car drivers, or aliens from outer space or playing house in, under, or on top of the climber. The point is that in order to distinguish play activities from non-play activities a spatial doubling has to take place involving assigning content (augmentation) to the activity.

To further clarify this formal understanding of play it is necessary to explore *how* the dyadic content manifests itself, how its *being* should be characterized and how this being stands in relation to the individual.

A formal description of the content of the spatial dyad of play

The assigned content, which constitutes the second layer of the spatial dyad, can be characterized as objects of play. These objects manifest themselves in three different ways. *First*, the object can be a mental construction without the presence of a physical object. This can be illustrated by the following example. Let us consider a boy who plays soccer without a ball present. He simply moves around the playing field lifting his feet, avoiding imaginary opponents while dribbling the ball and scores a perfect goal. The object (soccer ball) is the result of a mental construction. The real soccer ball is physically absent, but the mental object is present. From a formal perspective the mental object illustrates not only the spatial dyad but also how objects in the dyad can manifest themselves. In this first example the manifestation is based on the absence of a physical object. At the same time the manifested object is perceived as a separate being that feels near. The first manner in which objects of play can manifest themselves is by nearness despite their physical absence.

The *second* way objects of play in the spatial dyad can manifest themselves is in line with Vygotsky and Walton and their understanding of make-believe. The mental objects are generated from, by or in relation to physical objects. The physical objects act as background or placeholders for the mental construction. In contrast to the first way in which objects of play can present themselves in the spatial dyad, objects in the second way rely on real objects to anchor physically absent content (the stick that becomes a horse, and the horse is central to the activity). Thereby the second manner in which objects can manifest themselves in spatial dyad relies on the presence of a real object *and* on the nearness and being of the augmented content. The distinction between the two is the presence or absence of physical objects.

The *third* way objects can manifest themselves in the spatial dyad is through self-referentiality. The individual uses him/herself as the object for the mental construction (augmentation). In this case, he or she proclaims him or herself to be king or queen, bandit, robber, dragon, bear, pilot, snowman, etc., thereby using her or himself as the present and physical object for the absent content (being king, queen, etc.).

To summarize briefly, the three ways objects in the spatial dyad can manifest themselves look like this: the *first* manifestation is through the absence of physical objects; in the second physical objects are present as anchors (prompters), while the third is made to manifest through self-referentiality.

In all three cases the content (objects) of the mental construction are perceived as central to the activity. The near but physically absent content dictates the play activity and what it is all about. Mental construction influences the activity by enhancing the experience in a way that means the activity becomes *more* than it was prior to that construction. *More* indicates that play always is dyadic.

To attempt to understand and formally characterize play in this way is, as has been said, to disregard the specific content or motivation of play. The attempt is only concerned with the spatial structure of play and how objects of play manifest themselves in order to create a useful description of the spatial structure of play that distinguishes, as precisely as possible, between play and non-play.

***Dasein*, being, place, and play**

Just as play can be viewed through theory of place as a spatial dyad consisting of two spatial layers, it can, when approached from a Heideggerian phenomenological perspective, be considered as a doubled form of being, consisting of actual being and absence of being (the three ways in which mental objects of play are physically absent yet at the centre of attention).

The spatial dyad with its doubled being seems to be aligned with the ontological structure of *Dasein* (which ‘in colloquial German can mean “everyday human existence”’ (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 13)). *Dasein* is Heidegger’s attempt to characterize both the involvement of being and at the same time openness towards a *there*.

Dasein is different from all other things (objects) by the fact that it stands in relation to its own being. Or as Heidegger writes, ‘*Dasein* is a being which is related understandingly in its being toward that being [*Sein*]’ (Heidegger, 2010, § 12, p. 53). It is essential that we do *not* see *Dasein*’s relatedness to its being as an attitude or way of being. Rather

the ‘essence’ [*Wesen*] of this being lies in its *to be*. [...] Thus the term ‘*Dasein*’, which we use to designate this being, does not express its what – as in the case of table, house, tree – but rather being [*Sein*]. (§ 9, pp. 41–41).

Dasein’s relatedness to its being should not be mistaken for subjectivity. It is far more fundamental since *Dasein*’s relatedness to its being is a transcendental condition of its being-in-the-world. *Dasein* cannot escape its ontological circumstance.

According to Heidegger (1988), *Dasein* should not be confused with a conscious subject. It is preferable to think of *Dasein* as a ‘being-there’ or a being ‘here’ and ‘there’ at the same time. It is being that consists of being in a place (here) and being open to another place at the same time. *Dasein* and place are therefore always already ‘integrated’ into each other through its being-in-the-world. Place is therefore not a condition for subjectivity, as would be the case in a Cartesian subject–object-oriented view of the world. Looking through Heidegger’s glasses, the relationship is reversed. Place is a condition for subjectivity and being or, as Malpas points out, place is where ‘the sort of being that is characteristically human has its ground’ (Malpas, 1999, p. 33).

Place reflects *Dasein*’s ontological structure since *Dasein* opens up and takes *in* space. *Dasein* does not occupy space as its corporeal body does or, as Heidegger writes,

Dasein is never objectively present in space, not even initially. *Dasein* does not fill out a piece of space as a real thing or useful thing would do, so that the boundaries dividing it from the surrounding space would themselves just define that space spatially. In a literal sense, *Dasein* takes space in. (Heidegger, 2010, § 70, p. 350)

This translates to a view of spatiality as something that *Dasein* not only ‘enters’ but also ‘produces’ or ‘creates’. This is radically different from Kant, where space unfolds itself as a reflection of temporality.

Within *Dasein*’s ontological structure it is thereby possible to find a double spatial relationship to being that can be paralleled with the spatial dyad of play. The phenomenon of play expresses a similar double spatial structure and double relationship to being as *Dasein* does. Or as Malpas writes, that *Dasein*’s presence

does not mean being in some indeterminate or general sense – presence is always a matter of a specific ‘there’. Similarly, disclosedness, [...] does not occur in some general or abstract fashion but always takes the form of a certain ‘clearing’ – ‘*Lichtung*’ – it is indeed the establishing and opening up of a ‘place’. (Malpas, 2008, p. 13)

The ‘Da’ in *Dasein* is a *there*, a *topos*, as Malpas writes. Therefore ‘being [is] never a matter simply of the coming to presence of a single being. [...] The presencing and disclosedness of a being is always a matter of its coming to presence in relation to other beings’ (p. 14). It is important to understand ‘presencing’ and ‘disclosedness’ as a happening of being in a place. This happening should be regarded, as Malpas writes, as

the happening of presence, where presence is not some simple ‘standing there’ of the thing independently of all else, but is, indeed, a matter of coming into relatedness with things in their sameness and difference, in their unity and multiplicity. (p. 15)

The happening of *Dasein*’s coming into being is a situational act closely connected with place. Or, as Malpas explains,

what soon becomes evident is that happening of presence or disclosedness is always the happening of a certain open realm (place) in which, not only things, but we ourselves are disclosed and come to presence – in which we are gathered together with the things around us. (p. 15)

The quotation expresses a close or perhaps indistinguishable relationship between being ‘here’ and ‘there’ as a happening in which we find ourselves and relate to things around us.

In relation to the formal description of play presented in this article *Dasein*’s ‘double’ being is centred on both being ‘there’ and opening to the absent, but ontologically present (the manifested objects of play). The presence of the mentally constructed soccer ball from the earlier example would in this context have ontological preference. The same goes for the examples where the stick becomes a horse or when the child becomes a king or queen.

The point is to identify how the content of the mental construction takes ontological preference over absent/present/self-referential physical objects and how the doubling of being in play takes place in a place (locality) that has the character of a ‘clearing’ or ‘*Lichtung*’, as Malpas writes.

Both Malpas and Dreyfus are explicit that *being* is not to be understood as something abstract but is concrete and present. In the context of play, mental content not only has a presence but it also enacts a concrete manifestation, which signals that the ongoing activity is, indeed, play.

Earlier I stated that play is situational and a uniform happening in which two layers of spatiality are merged (actual and mental). Heidegger’s understanding of *Dasein* rests upon a happening of presence and disclosedness, of being ‘here’ and ‘there’. It

is this happening that turns out to be at the very heart of Heidegger’s ‘question of being’ [...] the ‘happening’ of the very things that we encounter in our concrete and immediate experience of the world. (Malpas, 2008, p. 15)

In this context play can be seen as the very happening of *being*.

Conclusion

This article has argued that play is indeed very different from games and that it is more than an attitude in playing games. Play is not structured gaming. It is a phenomenon in its own right. And it is closely connected with ‘make-believe’. In that respect, I follow Vygotsky. But instead of analysing play using the paradigm of temporality, play has been addressed from another theoretical complex: theory of place and Heidegger’s phenomenology. Taken together, they present another paradigm of thinking – that of spatiality and being.

Included in theory of place is an emphasis on place and spatiality. They make it possible to describe play as a spatial dyad consisting of two different layers of spatiality. The *first* is concerned with actual reality or locality of play, while the other is interested in the spatiality of a mental augmentation. This formal description is useful with relevance to determining play from non-play. The formal aspect of this definition stresses that the various manifestations of particular content in play are of lesser importance. What is significant is how the formal layout of spatiality is in play.

Theory of place also makes it possible to clarify how the mental augmentation is shaped and how it presents itself. It can manifest itself in three different ways; the *first* without physical objects to support it (playing soccer without a ball or skipping without a rope being present); *second* with support from a present physical object (the stick becomes a horse which holds ontological preference), and finally where the player uses him/herself as the object for augmentation (being king, queen, etc. through self-referentiality).

Heidegger’s phenomenology can help in assessing the ontological state of the mental augmentation. In all the cases presented the added spatial layer can be said to be more present than the present or absent physical objects. In this way objects of play express closeness or nearness while being physical absent. The augmented spatial layer in the dyad has preference over the physical reality.

This makes it possible to define play as *a situational and uniform happening of a spatial dyad where there is a doubling not only of spatiality but also of being, which takes preference over the physical reality. The doubled being is characterized by the nearness of the physically absent.* The relevance of formally defining play in this way is that it disregards the content of play while making it clear whether an activity can be categorized as play or not.

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