

playworkings

plā'wèrk'ings, n. Portions of play matters consideration; draft formations.

The war on the war on obesity.

April 26, 2018

Further to my recent post on the childhood obesity agenda, a little refinement is necessary. This is a subject matter that might gain continual return in my writing. Briefly, my current thinking is that play, as precious and beautiful and as fraught or vociferous as it is, is engaged in for the sake of itself; play 'used' for instrumental gain by external parties is disingenuous to what play is, for the player. So, by not so stealthy means (and despite the fact that the 'p' word — as playworkers know it — hardly gains any real degree of recognition in those external parties' outpourings), when play is manipulated (albeit under the guise of, say, 'physical activity') towards solving issues (societal, economic: political), I'm in disagreement.

The manipulation in question here is the obesity agenda. My writing/thinking is a reframing of prevalent perceptions of play: play, for the player, is autotelic. Regarding autotelic theory, Burghardt (2005) writes that this 'derives from the view that all play is done for its own sake . . . the play performance is its own gratification, not the putative end or goal. Thus, autotelic means that the goal (telos) of the behaviour is itself (auto)'. Compare this to the one reference to 'play' I've managed to find, to date, amongst government documents — under a section entitled 'supporting early years settings' in the Department of Health and Social Care's (2017) document *Childhood obesity: a plan for action*, it's stated that:

'In early 2017 . . . we will update the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework to make specific reference to the UK chief medical officers' guidelines for physical activity in the early years (including active play).'

It is only 'active play' deemed as beneficial: there is an agenda for its use; furthermore, it's included in a section specifically referenced to the early years. It is as if play doesn't or shouldn't exist beyond the early years because it will, by then, have further transmuted into other forms of activity that have (playworker un-endorsed) measurable outcomes. If playworkers continue to jump on the bandwagon of using the 'play as physical activity to help solve obesity agenda', then play for play's sake loses out, even if the funding is provided. Well, some might say, play the game, twist things for your project's benefit: it helps keep the real play agenda going. That it might, but it doesn't help in the long run, I'd say. The wider perception of play for play's sake won't be enhanced because people haven't been adequately informed.

Play for play's sake: this is the message we should be continually shouting out. We have to call it as it is.

This 'calling it as it is' brings me back round to the government's obesity agenda. It has long been my contention that, despite the rhetoric of concern for the health and well-being of the nation, the actual bottom line is that the economic strain on the NHS, and by extension, the government coffers, is the real driving force. So, it's apposite that the following news report has been filed today: Nick Triggle (2018) writes for the BBC that the 'NHS needs £50bn extra by 2030', citing 'a former health minister and leading surgeon', Lord Darzi.

A few days ago, I felt obliged (though, really, I didn't actually want to) to wade around in the murky depths of the Tory Party Manifesto — more technically reference-able, perhaps, as The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto (2017). I felt obliged to root around in order to feed my obesity agenda concerns, to get some evidence, though I felt dirty for it afterwards! I do it so you don't have to. A few nuggets unearthed, for your consideration:

The manifesto is aimed at what it calls 'ordinary working families', stating explicitly that '[t]hey are the people to whom this manifesto is dedicated.' (p.8). Does this then presuppose that everyone not included in the narrow overlap of whatever 'ordinary', 'working' and 'family' are considered to be are not included?

'We do not believe in untrammelled free markets. We reject the cult of selfish individualism.' (p.9). (The jury appears to be out on this one, given the reputation of ministers of recent times, based on actions). Let's move onwards though with the economic agenda.

Under the heading of 'five giant challenges', the manifesto points to '[t]he need for a strong economy' (p.6), and this bullet point comes top of the list. The capitalist agenda is, contrary to feeble attempts to persuade us otherwise, prevalent: 'Without business and enterprise, there would be no prosperity and no public services.' (p.9); 'A strong economy is the basis for everything we want to achieve as a nation.' (p.13); 'Capitalism and free markets remain the best way to deliver prosperity and economic security.' (p.16).

How does the party plan our present and our future? We're in the sausage machine of 'productivity', don't forget:

'[W]e will continue to strive for full employment.' (p.54); 'We need to give every child in our country the best possible education if we are to provide them with the best opportunities in the world.' (p.50) (that is, employability). Education is filed under a section entitled 'The world's great meritocracy', where it's stated that ours should be 'a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow, where advantage is based on merit not privilege.' (p.49) (work hard, be productive, be a part of the machine, the economy requires it). Let's just gloss over the quote about privilege here because it's laughable.

So, we come to the NHS and the economy and the productive units of society. It must stick in the throats of the Tories who might well prefer that the NHS is sold off, to be more profitable, but it can't, yet, when the manifesto declares that '[t]he Conservative Party believes in the founding principles of the NHS . . . care should be free at the point of use.' (p.66). The ghost of Aneurin Bevan must be howling for conflicting reasons.

The manifesto attempts to temper the subtitle that is 'The money and people the NHS needs' (p.66) with its touch of the human element, but really it's the money that stands out. Yes, it is a service that needs paying for, this can't be denied, but the humanity rings hollow, the sentiment as read thereafter that the nation's health and well-being are paramount is secondary (if that high up at all) to the finances. So it is we come back to childhood obesity and 'the crisis of obesity':

'We will continue to take action to reduce childhood obesity . . . We shall continue to support school sport, delivering on our commitment to double support for sports in primary schools.' (p.72). Yes, I'm cynical and no, I don't apologise: use play, or approximations of it, or near-guesses of it, to ramp up fitness, to deliver (or pump in 'education') academic achievement, to create 'opportunity' for jobs, to become productive units for the economy. Blah.

Returning to the Department of Health and Social Care's (2017) *Childhood obesity: a plan for action* document, it is stated that:

'[N]ot only are obese people more likely to get physical health conditions like heart disease, they are also more likely to be living with conditions like depression . . . [t]he economic costs are great, too.' I suspect that the last line here, being the first line of the second paragraph, is the real first line of the document. The first line though, as given, is rather: 'Today nearly a third of children aged 2 to 15 are overweight or obese.' What this doesn't do, however, is play straight with the document it cites for this. This document, the Health and Social Care Information Centre's (2015) *National child measurement programme (England, 2014/15 school year)*, gives statistics for reception age (four year olds) and Year 6 (eleven year olds), not 2-15 year olds. The focus of the former document is on obesity, but the latter document has four categories of weight, being: underweight, healthy weight, overweight and obese (also combining the last two for comparison purposes). What is then read in *Childhood obesity: a plan for action*, no doubt, is that the 'overweight' category becomes subsumed into an all-encompassing 'obesity'.

The Health and Social Care Information Centre's (2015) document also suggests that, in fact, the trend for obesity in four year olds is going down, not up:

'The prevalence of obese [reception age] children (9.1%) was lower than 2013/14 (9.5%) and 2006/07 (9.9%). Over a fifth (21.9%) of the children measured were either overweight or obese. This was lower than in 2013/14 (22.5%) and 2006/07 (22.9%).' (p.9).

A closer look at the whole range of percentages for the four categories of weight, for four year olds, allows us to see a picture that isn't just focused on the 'negative news', putting things in perspective:

'Table 1: Prevalence of the BMI classifications, by school year and sex, England 2014/15: [Underweight] 1.0 [%]; [healthy weight] 77.2 [%]; [overweight] 12.8 [%]; [obese] 9.1 [%].' (p.10).

Plugging my [previous post](https://playworkings.wordpress.com/2018/04/17/play-for-plays-sake/) (<https://playworkings.wordpress.com/2018/04/17/play-for-plays-sake/>)'s figures for population of four year olds (662,738) into an equation that has it that 9.1% of these are obese (coming out at 60,309, give or take), and with the assumption of 16,786 state-funded schools for children of that age, we still come out at 4 children per school, rounded up, falling into this category. Four. Now, the added extra to the thinking is the explicit acknowledgement of children's BMI categories being played off against each other and only those at the 95th percentile (i.e. 95% of the reference population weigh less) are seen as obese: surely, in any reference population where percentiles are made use of, a certain number are going to be in that top bracket, no matter what their weight?

Let's come back full circle. The Department of Health and Social Care's (2017) *Childhood obesity: a plan for action* document states that:

'There is also evidence that physical activity and participating in organised sports and after school clubs is linked to improved academic performance.'

Ramp up fitness, to deliver (or pump in 'education') academic achievement, to create 'opportunity' for jobs, to become productive units for the economy. Blah. There's even reference to how Ofsted will be used as a stick to ensure compliance of the above, though not, of course, in those words.

Poor play (or loose approximations of it, notwithstanding the argument that 'sport' and 'play' can, philosophically, be deemed as different things entirely). It is to the perception of play, or its grouping together with 'sport', 'physical activity for xyz benefit', and so forth, that I write of. Poor play: used to improve academic performance, for greater 'opportunity' to access the 'world's great meritocracy', to be economically purposeful, to be a part of the sausage machine of productivity, to not cost the government coffers too much.

What of play, for play's sake?

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Play, for play's sake

April 17, 2018

The rhetoric of play as an instrumental tool is everywhere (within the limited incidence of its national discussion). It seems that politicians (if they even engage with the idea of 'play' at all), journalists, the majority of those who work with children in any capacity, et al, seem to be predominately fixated on outcomes, desirable goals, end product, future-fixing. Play, in this construct, is a means to an end. Play,

in this formation, is an adult-manipulation. What children see is different, and it is what children see and how and why they engage in their play that should be the most important consideration when play is the subject of contemplation.

For a long while I've been banging this particular drum, but recently and specifically I've been somewhat grated by the whole affair that is the instrumental use of play in order to help 'solve' the 'national obesity crisis'. The cynic in me suspects (though can't yet substantiate) that there is no great and overwhelming desire for the health and well-being of people in the eyes of the government and other powers that be: it's more to do with counting the beans and keeping the costs to the NHS down. I do wonder about the numbers. That is, I'm dubious about how much of a crisis this 'crisis' really is. I'm particularly dubious with regards to the contention that there's a huge obesity crisis in school children.

Now, before I go further, some balancing out: yes, I have witnessed some examples of particularly overweight children in my day-to-days in various locations, and it's fair to say that this highlights that those children exist, of course, beyond the dry spreadsheet data. I'm also aware that some areas of the country, or of particular towns, cities or rural areas, might be more prone to a greater occurrence of higher body mass index (BMI) in children (by way of all manner of complex socio-economic factors). However, having worked in some areas of recognised socio-economic 'deprivation', I just don't see what the statistics are saying. (I don't claim extensive observational evidence, of course: who could? I accept that this is a snapshot).

Could it be that, simplistically, all the obese children are indoors on their Xboxes and Playstations and not out and about playing? Well, the instrumental argument follows a simple cause and effect of 'run around, get fit', after all. That said, why aren't all the underweight and, for want of an appropriate word, 'normal' (whatever that is) weighted children (within the acceptable BMI percentile) who play in such ways considered in that equation? i.e. not seen out and about, so must be lazy, on their way to obesity, need to be 'fixed'. The discussion is wider than the one that often goes along the lines of: if we use play to make children fit, then there will be less obesity and people will be better for it. 'If we use play' is a red flag to this particular playworker.

So, this post is an entire exercise in 'back of an envelope' calculations and notes. (Fair warning: there will be some rough workings and plenty of scribbling of numbers). How many obese children are there actually? We get fed the message of a 'crisis' or an 'obesity epidemic' but we don't always get the numbers to back it up. Then, when we receive some data, we get this in handy sound-bites too, without really knowing how that relates to the whole. This line of thinking struck me on reading a recent article in The Guardian entitled *Obesity putting strain on NHS as weight-related admissions rise* (Boseley, 2018). Apart from the article's title feeding my cynicism re: the economic impact on the NHS, the main point of interest was the following:

Childhood obesity has not shifted very much since the school measurement programme was introduced in 2006-7. Last year [2017] 10% of children starting school in the reception year were classed as obese, a slight decrease over time.

It was number crunching time! For the purposes of balance here, Boseley does go on to add that 'the proportion for those leaving in Year 6 for secondary school was 20%, which is a small increase.' It's beyond the scope of this particular post to speculate on the causes of the apparent 10-20% increase between school years R-6 (age 4 to 11 in the UK) because I'm interested in comparing observational (and albeit piecemeal) data with the statistics of younger children deemed to be obese.

Are there really such huge numbers of obese four year olds in the UK? Ten per cent screams out like a crisis. However, what are we really looking at here? Before we go any further, a quick overview of body mass index (BMI) and 'obesity'. According to information given by [diabetes.co.uk](http://www.diabetes.co.uk) (<http://www.diabetes.co.uk>), if your BMI (measured by dividing your weight in kg by your height in metres squared) is 30 or above then you're classed as obese. If there's an obesity crisis in children (in this study, four year olds in Reception class), another question is how much might all these children weigh to be classed as obese?

So, to the number crunching. The Department for Education (DfE) (2017) provides figures for England on school attendees (so, the start of back of an envelope workings-out if extrapolation needs doing for the UK as a whole). It states that there are, as of January 2017, some 4,689,660 children at state funded primary schools in England and that there are 16,786 state funded primary schools in this country. This gives an average of 279 children per primary school. According to the Office for National Statistics (2015), 2011 being the most up to date census, in which admittedly, all the following are closer to secondary school age now than Reception age, there were at that date some 763,851 four year olds in the UK. It doesn't give the figures for England alone so some creative extrapolation needs to be done: [ukpopulation.org](http://www.ukpopulation.org/england-population/) (<http://www.ukpopulation.org/england-population/>) suggests that, as of 2017, there were around 54.99 million people in England. Calculating, from the 2011 census, that the percentage of four year olds to the UK total population was around 1.21% (763,851 out of 63,379,787), this gives a current working figure of around 662,738 four year olds in England (yes, I'm aware that I'm working on 2011 and 2017 data sets, but it's back of the envelope stuff, this). That is, 1.21% of 54.99 million total population of England, rather than the UK. If we divide this 662,738 by the DfE statistic of 4,689,660 children at state funded primary schools in England in 2017, we reach the figure of some 14% of primary school children being 4 year olds, i.e. Reception age. (Checking my maths is fine, and please let me know if you see an error in the calculations).

If there are 279 children per primary school on average, then 14% of this figure gives us an estimate of 39 four year olds per primary school. Citing the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2017), Boseley (2018) reckons on 10% of four year olds being obese. That, according to my number crunching, equates to four Reception class four year olds per primary school in England (i.e. 10% of 39 children per school). Four.

Now, as the quote goes, there are lies, damn lies and statistics, but four isn't a crisis, is it? There are those who will, no doubt, shout out that even one is too many. Yes, if we're talking about genuine health grounds for concern, then maybe. We should look at what BMI calculations for four year olds mean in numbers. If [the average four year old](https://www.onaverage.co.uk/body-averages/average-child-height) (<https://www.onaverage.co.uk/body-averages/average-child-height>) is, taking into account variations for gender, around 1.05m tall (or, 3 feet 5 inches in 'old money') then their weight would need to be in the region of 33kg (or, around 5 stone 3lbs, because, frankly, you might as well ask me to weigh someone out in buckets of sand for all I know about how much 33kg is!) for their BMI to hit the obese classification of 30. Here's the point: 33kg, or a little over 5 stone, is a lot for a four year old to weigh. How many of those do you actually see?

I'm still dubious after all my number crunching. There's an extra layer of cynicism here as well though: this may well come back to bite me in some way but if playworkers jump on the 'obesity agenda' bandwagon to get their work funded, for example, then aren't they falling into the trap that supports the notion that play has to be 'for' something, future-fixing? We know what play's about, playworkers. We really do. If the future fixers over-ride the idea of play for play's sake, as children know it to be, then play gets fully subsumed as a subset of sport, citizenship, social engineering and so on. Play should not be taken over by the soft- or hard-line control agenda. The agenda goes something like this: play in 'xyz'

way because sport/fitness, or any other health agenda, will help you be healthy model citizens, you'll be 'responsible' (i.e. thinking in the same way as the rest of the masses), and you won't cost the country as much, economically or otherwise.

Play is better than this, more magical than this, more ineffable. On the rare occasion that it does manage to be uttered from the mouth of a politician, it often comes out distorted. I recently sat through forty minutes of a recorded online ministerial debate, poorly attended as it was, though at least play was nominally the subject (my apologies for not yet being able to transfer the link). It was brought up for discussion by Chris Leslie MP (Labour) and though he did bring the subject of funding for playgrounds up (so, all good there), he did bang the 'play and obesity' drum a little too much. I sighed, again. Still, the other fella (Conservative MP, Rishi Sunak) was playing on his phone somewhat and not giving the impression he was paying attention and thus, I suspect was the case, when his turn came he rattled off his pre-prepared speech, slipping in an attempted one-up to the Rt Hon other fella by claiming one more offspring, and then going on ad nauseum about the instrumental nature of all things play without ever mentioning play, in essence, at all (sport, fitness, yes, as I remember it, even mental health, and social cohesion, but not play).

Thus ends today's sermon of number crunching and disconsolation at the instrumental perception of play, to the accompaniment of the banging of drums and the shrill peeping of pipes, which — being maybe in so high a pitch that very few can actually hear — keep on saying, over and over: play for play's sake, play for play's sake.

Or, to shift the inflection with the flick of a comma: play, for play's sake.

Addendum:

Thank you to Jim Ley (see comments below) for the feedback on the difference between BMI calculations for adults and children. In the spirit of how this blog has always been written, these posts are all works in progress (playworkings in themselves) and so an addendum is required to the above writing. As Jim points out, a BMI of 30 for children would be extremely high and different figures are considered for those of a younger age. Whilst I was aware of the percentile aspect of the BMI calculations, this didn't get relayed in my writing. So, although some of the calculations above are going to change, the argument still stands that the obese child is not, as observed, as prevalent as we're led to believe.

Jim suggests a more 'mid-healthy' BMI for a child to be 15 rather than 23 for an adult and, whilst knowing where the line is crossed for obesity in an adult is said to occur (stated as 30), the calculation isn't so clear for a child.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/childhood/defining.html>) website states that: 'Obesity is defined as a BMI at or above the 95th percentile for children and teens of the same age and sex', meaning that 'the child's BMI is greater than the BMI of 95% of [children] in the reference population.'

So, to return to my calculation of a 3 feet 5 inch tall (1.05m) tall four year old and using a back of the envelope BMI of 23 (assuming this to fall above the 95th percentile for this age) then that child would still need to weigh a little over 25kg (4 stone) to be classed as obese. The argument still stands.

Thank you again, Jim, for your corrections. This blog and its posts are an ongoing conversation, so I leave the original in its place with this addendum (in the spirit of showing all my workings!)

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In praise of some colleagues of play.

March 20, 2018

Reading through the posts and pages of this site, as I have been doing as of late, it's occurred to me that I write a lot in praise of play, in support of children and their rights, about what those children do or how they are (it *is* a blog with a certain focus, after all) — in echoing A. S. Neill, of Summerhill, I am 'on the side of the bairns' (Neill, 1916; cited by Croall, 1983: 57), but I don't always give as much credit where it's due to the adults who are also focused in such a way. That is, in respect of the current thinking, I thought it high time I wrote a little about some of those who I've worked with, over the years, in our joint focus of working with and for the children, who I've either learned from, been inspired by, or just simply enjoyed working with because they enjoyed working with the children and were good at what they did.

Now, the caveat here is that I'm not looking to raise the status of playworker (or the playworking-minded) to an ego-focus (maybe, 'raise' isn't the right word here) — as I've written elsewhere, and more than once, play (and the playground) isn't about the playworker. What I *am* looking to do is to say that this person, or that person, has had a positive affect, even if they didn't know it at the time. For this caveat above and because of privacy, I won't mention any names: if those people read here, they'll hopefully recognise themselves. If they don't read here, then it's here for anyone else, or for them if they ever find it.

There's no particular rhyme or reason for the list I'm forming in my head, other than what I've already written above, so there will be omissions and that doesn't mean that those people weren't good either. There has to be some start process though. I don't want to write things out in chronological order either, and nor do I wish to create some sort of hierarchy of 'value'. I shall press the internal shuffle button and see what transpires.

This post wasn't going to be written with the added extra of academic references, but now in the flow I can see another relevant one floating up in my mind's eye: Hughes (2001: 172) writes about what he terms as six different 'playwork approaches' and the 'quality of child/playworker relationship' as he sees it, in each. These six approaches are broadly grouped into four degrees of relationship interaction, namely: poor (for the 'repressive' and 'nosy' approaches); better (for the 'functional' approach); good (for the 'enthusiastic' approach); high (for the 'perceived indifferent' and 'controlled authentic' approaches). For the purposes of writing about my previous play-minded colleagues, I find myself thinking about the latter three approaches of the above list. (I'm not differentiating between 'good' and 'high' quality relationships for the purposes of this writing: it's all on a level).

I've worked in many places and with many people over the years, and some of those adult colleagues can easily be seen as enthusiasts (though they could spill over into taking over the play, they had their hearts in the right places and the children seemed to love having them around); some have practised, with intelligence and sophistication, that sometimes difficult skill of being acutely aware of what's going on around them, though whilst exhibiting apparent indifference; some have been authentically engaged in support of the needs and preferences, the anxieties and just plain random strangeness of the children around them, and those children 'know'. I'll leave you to figure who fits where in the Hughes model. So, with the preliminaries over, onwards and onwards.

A long time ago (in a galaxy far, far away!), I worked with a group of teenagers who (though we didn't call ourselves playworkers at the time) were playworkers in training. I wasn't so much older than they were myself, but it did strike me that these amazing people were worth their weight in gold. One in particular was always bright and beautiful, always focused on the play, even when she wasn't so upbeat in herself (she found a way), and I just appreciated her energy. I've written about 'grace' a few times before, in respect of those who populate a place where children play (whether they are the children or the adults), and when she and I worked together, I felt that. Years later, in another place and in another

life, I remember another colleague who, I think, is probably the most grace-full person I've ever worked with. She was quiet and caring, fragile in some ways, but just right, in my opinion, for those particular younger children there.

Maybe this is turning into a list of attributes for the ideal playworking person. Let's mix it up. Zoom forwards another few years: I met a male playworker of roughly the same age as me and we were fairly chalk and cheese in many, many respects. We worked together closely, a lot, and so we had the easy ability to wind each other up: he would do it deliberately and I often took the bait! That said, I have to give it to him, when he was on form as a playworker, he was definitely on form. He had a look in his eye that told me that not only could he sense the play and the actions of the adults all around him, but that he wanted to push his luck a little more and more, just to see what would happen! He enjoyed the provoking, but he also knew the importance of play and wanted others to see it too. The children, most importantly, I think, also 'knew' and sensed him.

I've been lucky enough, over the years, to meet and work with plenty of people from various other countries (those from India, America, Finland, Sweden, France, Italy, Morocco, and Spain spring immediately to mind). Some of these people became good friends. A while back I had the good fortune to work with someone who came to England on a form of cultural exchange, and who later became a music teacher, I believe: we worked with children in forest locations and he was open to trying just about anything, and he was softly amazing with the children. In a similar vein (and if you trawl through the posts on this site, you'll find this next person quietly amongst the words), I shall always remember the support worker who pushed a child in his specially adapted wheelchair up the steep inclines to where the forest school session was being held, and she worked with that boy and focused all her energy and attention on him without a word of personal grievance (if she had any at all). Some people just stay in the mind for simple acts, for years gone by.

A few years back, I worked with a man I had so much time and respect for, and over our years of working together he would bring me stories of his own children's play, or he'd show me short films he'd made of them at play. It took me a little time to acclimatise to his humour, to his ways of working, to his ways of being, but when I did I realised that this man was the absolute heart and soul of the place. Many of the children loved and respected him, and he would often go out of his way to do things for them if they needed it, in difficult circumstances.

In a slight detour away from playwork colleagues, I did a short piece of work in a school once and was just struck happy by the sight of one of the teachers I was working with as she got inside a plastic barrel and interacted with the children on the level of play. It could have been perceived as inauthentic, some could say, but in *that* moment, with *that* teacher, with *those* children, in *that* place, it felt good and fine. You can often read things fairly accurately by reading the reactions of the children.

When it comes to reading skills, in the context of how I describe it above, two more playworkers come immediately to mind: together, and in overlaps of time, we developed a place for play, somewhere that the children also developed in their own fashion and for their own reasons, and we adults all needed to be very aware of what was happening, when, maybe why, and what might happen next, and so on. My colleagues were excellent readers of the place (by which I mean a combination of the built, the natural, the human, the temporal environment), and I respected their opinions, their ideas, their observations more than I think I could ever truly get across.

There are many others who have also had such positive affect on those around them (children and their families, other colleagues, me), at the time, and in time. There are those who listen without prejudice (yes, you know who you are!), and there are those who give great care. It's not all been plain-sailing, of

course: there have been ripples and great waves and everything in between in the seas of playworking interactions; that said, there's been plenty of fire and grace, attention to detail, softness and oddness of idiosyncrasy along the way, so far.

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CATEGORY:

PLAYWORKINGS

TAGGED WITH:

LEAVE A COMMENT

- A. S. NEILL
- ADULT IMPACT
- ADULT PLAY
- BOB HUGHES
- CONNECTIVITY
- KNOWING
- PLAYWORK
- PLAYWORKER
- REFLECTION
- RELATING
- SCHOOL
- SUMMERHILL

Ctrl + alt + delete (play)

March 15, 2018

Plenty of my playworking and other day-to-day thinking energy, lately and historically, seems to have gone into concerns about the ostensibly innocuous but actually insidious little word that is 'control'. When that word comes inextricably entwined within the context of working for children, it becomes particularly distasteful. A fair percentage of adults, I would hazard a guess at, would or do object to the idea of being controlled by another adult: yet, controlling children is often deemed fine by those same adults.

Let's first get the tired old responses out of the way (the ones that are used again and again in such discussions on the subject matter — discussions that invariably result in nothing more than a clash of ideologies): yes, sometimes children *will* benefit from an alert adult's quickfire instructions (such as when a child hasn't seen an imminent and potentially life-threatening hazard — a situation of necessary

'control?'); no, the opposite of 'controlling children' won't definitively result in 'chaos', 'anarchy', or complete global-social meltdown for that matter; yes, we *do* all live in a world where we have to navigate around one another and their concerns, desires and general situations and viewpoints (though that doesn't mean we should be able to exert control on others as a means of getting by and getting along, co-operating); no, this is not about how children should 'respect adults' (think of it the other way around). There may be more, but you get the gist.

Play is often seen as a bad word. This is deeply troubling. A significant section of a library could be constructed with material that relates directly or indirectly to what play is seen to be, how it benefits animals and humans, how it shapes or is shaped by culture, its evolutionary and therapeutic relevances, and so on. Play is treated in studies in psychology, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, zoology, anthropology, technology, engineering, the arts, theology . . . just as a quick off-the-cuff list. Yet, for some, for many, play is frivolous, 'unpurposeful', pointless, bad.

In my playworking meanderings, I have known children who function, variously, on a kind of continuum between the rough markers of being utterly (emotionally and psychologically) crippled by the general or specific adult impact of any given environment on their true selves, to utterly self-confident and joyful beings. The latter are open and experimental, taking in all that those around them offer up. The former are compliant and narrow for fear of failure or displeasing the dominant force (i.e. the adult or the system or both). Those habitually subjected to controlling environments either buckle under and become subsumed by the dominance or they learn intermediate coping mechanisms, which at least go some way to allowing some of their natural selves through whilst appearing to appease the dominance at the same time. Sometimes (it's clear to the astute eye), children are and have to be extremely subtle and sophisticated in the psychological games they're obliged to operate.

In a playworking context (by which I mean, playworker input or input of play-literate others), there are actions that can be taken. These, however, may necessarily also need to be subtle and sophisticated. As a starting point here, I'm drawn to the thinking on what's termed as what 'interfere[s] with the successful flow of [the] play drive' (Hughes, 2001: 170): I read this, in the context of my own observations and experience, as including adults who negatively affect, who psychologically and emotionally concern the child so that playing is not immediately possible. The actions of a playworking adult can alleviate the psychic discord and bring the affected child to a position of being able to engage in spontaneity. That is, the conditions can be shifted so that play can happen. As you might imagine, this is not always so easily achieved (playworking adults can be subjected to controlling environments too).

Play happens when children (and adults, and animals) find themselves in conducive environments. Fagen (1975) cites Bally (1945) in explaining the 'relaxed field' necessary for play. Fagen's writing is focused on the benefits of play as connected to a technological-engineering context and the benefits of experimentation over control (the former having a broad potential and the latter being narrow and limited, as I read it):

The playful behaviour of [a feedback loop] procedure . . . suggests that play should be viewed as optimal generic learning by experimentation in a relaxed field (where the term 'relaxed field' (Bally, 1945) refers to the absence of goals of control).

— Fagen (1975: 160)

He gives the example of computing equipment learning to operate an aeroplane by trial and error. The feedback loop (including all the 'inefficient' extras of those 'what if this or that were to be done?' experiments) is analogous to the play of children. Replace the stereotyped thinking that tends to define

the word 'learning' as 'something for the future benefit' with 'something found out' (for the present tense) and there's a good enough analogue of play here. 'Control' and control agendas by external sources stultify the present tense experimentation; the relaxed field becomes tensioned.

Or, as Fagen goes on:

[A 'relaxed field', according to Bally (1945) is] a situation in which immediate needs are satisfied and no threat to the organism's well-being is present [thus allowing play to take place] . . . goals of information [information-gathering, i.e. experimentation by play] can be achieved only when goals of control [non-play tasks] are absent . . . In the presence of goals of control, play is absent.

— Fagen (1975: 162)

On reflection, it is the lack of 'threat to the organism's [child's] well-being' that stimulates the 'relaxed field', and it is the relaxed field, when play can take place, that stimulates the well-being. It's a repeated-giving positive loop in action. This is all a long-handed way of writing what the intuitively play-literate individual knows by heart, by faith and conviction.

Those adults of a controlling persuasion no doubt see it differently. Certain adults need specific purpose (well, it's fair to say that many of us have a need for 'purpose', this is acknowledged): however, some adults are disrespectful towards the needs of children. Children don't need 'control'; they need play (I write this in the context of a need as something that addresses a deficit). Where there has been no opportunity for play or a suppression of play, children will seek it out to redress the balance. Is it the same equation for those adults who have a need to exercise control? Perhaps: there may be an initial deficit in opportunity to exercise power or purpose.

A little out of context with the original intention of the following quoted words, I come back to a presentation given by Simon Rix at the New Ventures (Playwork) Conference at Felix Road Adventure Playground in Bristol last year. Simon was talking about disenfranchised young men in the Midlands and their focus on self-worth due to factors that had affected them. Simon's standout line for me, in respect of those young men's opinions, was: 'What am I for?' Or, to paraphrase and slightly shift, because I've used this quote before: *What's the point of me?* If I can be forgiven for the borrowing, I suspect the same opinion lurks deep in the psyche of those adults who seek to control the actions and interactions (and play) of children.

Bob Hughes writes:

. . . the adult may see the child as a piece of property, where the child's free interaction with the world undermines the feelings of power the adult gets from controlling the child's behaviour.

— Hughes (2001: 124/5)

In summary, yes we live in a social environment of dynamic and multiple needs (i.e. we have to cope with other people in our day-to-days), but no that doesn't mean that 'control' mechanisms are the optimal means of 'getting along'. Play is like water (in its flow and sensory affect): control is for the narrowly channelled, the straight-lined, the dry of spirit.

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CATEGORY:

PLAYWORKINGS

TAGGED WITH:

LEAVE A COMMENT

- ADULT IMPACT
- CONTROL
- PLAYWORK
- PLAYWORKER
- RELATING

Page one: on radical play.

February 28, 2018

Radical:

[selected definitions]

Adj. Of or pertaining to a root or to roots.

Forming the root, basis or foundation; original, primary.

Of qualities: inherent in the nature or essence of a thing or person.

Philology: a root; a word or part of a word which cannot be analysed into simpler elements.

— *Oxford English Dictionary (1979)*

For quite a few years now I've heard myself say things related to play and playwork in terms of 'really, this is page one stuff; it isn't so difficult to understand, is it?'. The 'Page One' of play is that children play for the sake of playing. The 'Page One' of playwork is that children play for the sake of playing, and playworkers do whatever they can so that children can do this. However, and it's a big 'however', for quite a few years now I've seen the trend of non-playworkers, potential employers, any given member of Joe Public seeing this 'Page One' stuff as somehow extreme, dangerous, 'radical' beyond acceptable limits. This troubles me.

I look over my writings and I know that I push buttons, like many writers: there's no point in an anodyne approach when there are things that need saying. So, I challenge those I think don't get the basics of play and I question petty pointlessness and inauthenticity and the like because I consider that it

needs this. When I dig down though, I see that at the root of play and playwork, I think, there is a simple softness of grace. I use the word 'simple' in the highest regard. In amongst the bluster that we sometimes talk in playwork, in amongst the bravado and the tub-thumping for rights, there's the 'Page One': here is play, just this.

So, a little ironically, admittedly, in order to delve into this a little more, I have to drag out the old soapbox again. Here's the nub of it all: what's so radical about play and, by extension, about playworking for children and their play? Playworkers can often be seen as having extreme views on play, and so society, but really that's just a matter of perspective: it's dependent on your starting position. If you're of the persuasion that play must have 'purpose', then the inherently unpurposeful play of children and the support of this by playworkers is, I suppose, going to challenge you. I see this, but I often don't understand why some people can't understand the 'Page One' stuff: it's on Page One for a reason.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definitions, above, give an interesting take on the meaning of the word 'radical'. To my reading, various disciplines such as literature, chemistry, mathematics, and the natural sciences, treat 'radical' as pertaining to that which is simplest, essential, at the root and core. This, strangely, is a way along the spectrum from 'extreme'. That said, the OED does also offer up a political definition for 'radical':

Politics: an advocate of 'radical reform'; one who holds the most advanced views of political reform on democratic lines, and thus belongs to the extreme section of the Liberal party.

— OED (1979)

Undoubtedly there is a political dimension to advocacy for play (both lower case 'p' and upper case 'P'), and some playworkers openly engage with this: perhaps therein lies a claim for propagation of the opinion that playworkers hold 'extreme' views about play; perhaps, in our times of rampant opinion on an infinite range of subjects (yes, I'm aware I'm adding to that grand corpus here), anything expressed as vaguely challenging to the political status quo is viewed as 'extreme'. There is, however, I suggest, a place for challenge whilst still operating within the margins of Page One.

We've all been children. We've all been experts at being children. Yet, many adults lose this expertise as they shift conditions on their life's journey (I'm not writing 'as they progress to adulthood' because that presupposes that adulthood is somehow a qualitatively better state to be in). Sometimes, in challenging other adults, a playworker can sense the glimmerings of self-recognition of that adult's former child-expertise. Often, no more needs be said as the candle is burning. Sometimes it takes the challenge of a return to play for that adult, without prejudice, for them to re-engage. Page One is open and seen. Often, it takes more than this, because many adults don't like to do what they deem to be 'the frivolous stuff', even though plenty of their day-to-day lives are, essentially, not important for the reasons that they think they are. Adults play too, and this is important, though they dilute it all by not calling it play. Sometimes, there's just so much resistance to the idea of play, an ossification that has settled on the spirit, that the soft challenge that has become the strong challenge becomes the Extreme Radical Challenge of the Anarchist Incarnate (aka the playworker). Page One is stuck to the title page and will not be seen. The former child-expert, the adult who won't see, has misplaced an essential element of themselves.

I find this troubling. I sound like an evangelist: I'm not, though there may be some truth in the thinking that there's a correlation between 'convincing' and 'converting to the playworking cause'. A playworker isn't trying to save souls, if you'll allow me a moment of flippancy. A playworker *does* want to have the

conversation about play though: if it can be said that there's a large contingent of adults out there who consider that children shouldn't adversely affect the actions, access to learning, and so on of other children, then those same adults ought really not be adversely affecting the children's actions, i.e. play, in this context, either.

On Page One, as I see it, children play for the sake of playing, and playworkers do whatever they can so that children can do this. There are so many individuals and organisations who claim to support playworking but, really, they won't or don't want to read the simple grace at the heart of it all, or they run from it when they find out: play and, by extension, playworking aren't so extreme — play is the root, foundational, the essence of things. It is the simple, radical truth.

CATEGORY:

PLAYWORKINGS

TAGGED WITH:

2 COMMENTS

- ADULT IMPACT
- ADULT PLAY
- PLAY
- PLAYWORK
- PLAYWORKER

Children's rights and being wronged

January 31, 2018

Following hard on the heels of an article written recently in The Guardian by Susanna Rustin (Votes at 16, yes. But children need more rights than that (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/30/votes-16-children-rights-welsh-britain/>)), I also came across another thoughtful post by Michael Rosen, who seems to write wisely and consistently about children, in his article in the same publication entitled Dear Damian Hinds [Education Secretary], Ofsted forgets our four-year-olds are not GCSE apprentices (<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jan/30/ofsted-reception-children-michael-rosen/>). I'd been collecting links to write an entirely different post over the past few weeks, but these two offerings above coalesced my thinking into writing on children's rights: always a worthy subject matter, in my opinion.

Rustin's article begins with the Welsh government's plans to reduce the age for voting to sixteen in local elections, as is permitted to those of this age in Scotland. She goes on to discuss the significant lack of concern at governmental level in England for children's rights — though we should ignore the tired reference that is 'Reach for a utopian vision of liberated children in charge of their destinies and you bump up against William Golding's dystopian Lord of the Flies' (no doubt included for the sake of journalistic balance). Notwithstanding this inadvertent stoking of the anti-rights flames, Rustin is at

pains to point out that children get a raw deal in England (the Welsh government have, for a long time now, been so much more advanced in their thinking towards those people in our society who just happen to be of or below the age to still attend school).

Michael Rosen writes of the school years with a cogent regard for children and their overall experience. His article highlights Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* report which, in his words, 'assumes that the most important thing about four-year-olds is that they need to be pump-primed for what's going to happen next.' In other words, more future-focused work, less play. In such a short piece, Rosen packs his writing with a lot of sense. He writes (in the form of an open letter to the Education Secretary, Damian Hinds):

Schooling has been increasingly built around the idea that a proportion of children are 'falling behind'. There are 'falling behind' tables . . . the report holds out, in the midst of setting and streaming, a no-one-falling-behind future. Perhaps you will acquire the special powers to prevent anyone from falling behind anyone else.

Rosen also quotes from *Bold Beginnings*:

'[L]istening to stories, poems and rhymes fed children's imagination' and '[S]ome headteachers did not believe in the notion of 'free play'. They viewed playing without boundaries as too rosy and unrealistic a view of childhood.'

He concludes this with the following:

It's not clear why 'imagination' is self-evidently good, while 'free play' is 'unrealistic'. Anyone who has spent any time thinking and writing about such things could as easily claim that 'imagination' is 'unrealistic' and 'free play' is self-evidently good.

The child's right to play continues to be steadily and not so stealthily eroded. Many adults seem to want or need to create subsets of play ('free play', as opposed to the seemingly more valuable 'structured play' or any derivation thereof that suggests 'solid' and 'useful' outcomes — learning, citizenship, social responsibility, moral fibre, etc.) and, by extension, 'free play' (whatever that transpires to be) is just a frivolous luxury. Regular readers of this blog know that the perspective here is that this 'frivolous luxury' is very far from the lived experience of play for children.

How do or could we know this? Considered observation and reflection is always a good starting point, but we can also open our minds and opinions by actively listening to the children around us and to providing real opportunities to canvas opinion. Rustin touches on this area of thinking in her writing on giving the vote to sixteen year olds (though the argument can also be used for younger school-goers too). Regarding real consultation with children, she writes: 'When did an education secretary, for example, last seek children's views on the national curriculum?'

It is interesting to note, in a gallows humour kind of way, the stream of anti-rights comments that filters through the public opinion boards of Rustin's article. There seems to be the dominant idea in the comments to her article that children — using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) definition of someone under the age of 18 — aren't 'fully developed', have little to no critical thinking and analysis skills, have limited life experience, and so on, and therefore cannot possibly be trusted to make important decisions as suggested by the right to vote. Where to start here? It isn't the fault of someone of a young age that they're of a young age, but I have had countless conversations over the years with UNCRC-defined-as children on all sorts of topics of interest and a lot of it has been thought-provoking to say the least.

In theory, the UK subscribes to the UNCRC (ratified in 1991) and there are at least two articles contained therein that are enshrined in the thinking, actions and conversations of any self-respecting playworker, these being: Article 12, paraphrased, children's right to an opinion about matters that concern them, and Article 31, children's right to play (although this needed a further General Comment 17 to clarify matters, Article 31 being caught up in leisure and relaxation as it also is). As an aside, and as I understand it, there is only one country currently not to sign up to the UNCRC (and this may take further research but I believe it's down to the concern for parents' rights), and that is the USA. In theory, the UK subscribes to the UNCRC but precious little 'real' consultation takes place, as per Article 12, and though of course play does and shall always happen, it's really adult attitudes towards play that need to be addressed so that a better offer can be made *as a matter of course*, not luxury, and as linked to Article 31.

Children expressing an opinion should not be a tick-box exercise. I have been to many schools or places designated as for play, as Rustin also alludes to in her article, where the UNCRC information is pasted on the walls, and I have observed or been part of plenty of consultations with children, but sometimes the efforts strike me as disingenuous. Children can work out the size and shape of things fairly quickly and they can play the game: they might write or say what the adult wants or needs to hear, but in their own time and on their own terms, they'll express entirely different opinions. I've seen and heard this first hand. I continue to see it happening. Children aren't stupid.

Where many adults have a need to create subsets of play, children will play in all their in-between time. Some adults find this disagreeable, unfocused, superficial, not towards any given ends. Children will play anywhere and everywhere, if that place is conducive to what they want to play and how they want to play. Children will play at any time, for the same reasons. So in trying to exercise their right to play (whether they know about the UNCRC or not), or in just getting on with what they are, as biological creatures, pre-disposed to do, i.e. play, children will play first thing in the morning and late at night, at meal times, at any given moment in the street going from destination to destination, in classes, waiting for the bus, brushing their teeth, going to the toilet, waiting in line, and all other instances which adults also do in their day-to-days and which, for those adults, are mundane necessities. Yet, this play of the children is not seen as play, often: it's disruptive, unfocused, impacting on the adult who wants or needs to be somewhere, and so on.

I'm not proposing that all adults (whether they be parents, teachers, or anyone involved with working with or just passing by children) just give up the ghost and do whatever the children want whenever they want to (this is where I usually have people citing Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and 'oh, but there'll be anarchy, and we can't have that', and I'm frankly bored of that now): conversation, relating, intuition, and understanding are all needed in a properly functioning and diversely populated aggregation of people, which just so happens to include 'x' many children, who have their own opinions, feelings, experiences and ideas too.

If our legislation bestows rights on individuals and groups of people in our society, then those rights should be properly served. Children, in England at least — not served by a devolved government — seem to have paper rights that aren't always properly provided for in the real world: the powers that be in Westminster, for example, have difficulty understanding that such small creatures called children could express valid points of view and that they tend towards something they know, as lived experience, as 'play' (four-letter word as that is, to some).

CATEGORY:

PLAYWORKINGS

TAGGED WITH:

LEAVE A COMMENT

- ADULT IMPACT
- CHILDREN'S CULTURE
- CHILDREN'S RIGHTS
- OBSERVATION
- PLAYABLE SPACES
- PLAYWORKER
- REFLECTION
- RELATING
- SCHOOL
- SOCIETY
- UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Anti-system connections

December 7, 2017

In stepping back to analyse recent events in our lives, sometimes strangely fluid — if not entirely lucid — patterns start to show themselves. I don't know if there's been a subconscious pull towards certain reading matter as of late, or if other mystic forces are at play (no, I don't believe in deities), but a majority of what I've picked up and read lately seems to be blaring and reflecting back at me my recent concerns of 'playworker as anti-system'. I'll explain in due course. Perhaps it's all a form of 'confirmation bias' kicking in: this idea that plenty of what I'm reading at the moment is holding up a placard emblazoned with 'See? You're right.' Or, at least, current reading material feeds neatly and accidentally into the conversation.

The basic concern has been going something like this: given that, for playworkers (true playworkers, whatever they might be), advocacy for children's right to play is right up there in the echelons of highest regard, is it actually as straightforward as this? That is, really, aren't those tub-thumping, breast-beating, right-on, never-lie-down playworkers actually fighting for play and for children more because they, the playworkers, are anti-system? Children are fundamentally anti-system, aren't they? (Or, in their natural state, before the onslaught of the whole system we live in has weighed them down and into subservience and submission, they are). Aren't playworkers then just fighting with kindred spirits against a common enemy? Are playworkers more about the fight, the cause, than they are about the rights of the community of recalcitrants?

Children are recalcitrants, as are playworkers. They kick against the system. Even so, I'm troubled further still in the thinking because it's one thing mixing things up a bit and quite another being a heretic. Sure, plenty of playworkers have to 'play the game', or approximations of it, to get things done, but deep down in those playworkers I suspect that there's some inner being racking up all the hard-won points against 'the system', even in those who wear the 'normalest' masks to play that game. This is a moment at the end of a paragraph for any playwork readers here to pause and reflect and be honest with themselves, to test out what I'm saying . . .

In my recent reading (which has been fairly spread and, as far as I'm consciously aware, not seeking out material to support the anti-system thinking), I was perusing posts I've missed from the various pages of [Arthur Battram \(https://plexity.wordpress.com/\)](https://plexity.wordpress.com/)'s blog and found this, by chance: [Thinking in Systems \(https://plexity.wordpress.com/2017/03/05/thinking-in-systems/\)](https://plexity.wordpress.com/2017/03/05/thinking-in-systems/), in which he highlights the writing of Donella H. Meadows via the Creative Systems website (link via link above) . . .

'So, what is a system? A system is a set of things — people, cells, molecules, or whatever — interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behaviour over time.

'A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves something. We can't impose our will on a system . . .'

Though we do try to impose our wills, this definition seems to me to describe 'the system' we live in: that is, the countless policies, procedures, rules, protocols, propaganda, bureaucracies and insidious expediency of containment that all serve to suppress and drain us all into submission. Too much, too strong? When we think it out, we know we're being caged but we often let it slide because, well, we have our wide screen TVs and our broadband and our all-branded products of every other flavour. Couldn't it all just be worse?

Children are suppressed by the system in all manner of creative and inelegant ways: they rarely have a real say in things that affect them; they're seen as adults-in-waiting and all that that entails; adults weigh on them in schools, in what passes as their non-school-non-work time, in their play, in how they're meant to be and act and think and see and do and what they should and shouldn't say, and . . . it goes on and on. It isn't any wonder that they push back when they can (if they haven't been pushed under too longer already). I've read similar or linked things in different texts this week (and I don't know now if it's a subconscious or a conscious seeking out):

Chance led me to an excellent book by an author I'd not heard of before. Jay Griffiths wrote *Kith: the Riddle of the Childscape* (2013) and I have every need to write further about her writing at some time in the near future. For now though (difficult though it is to pull out just one good quote), I offer up the following:

' . . . children loathe puritanism and they flock to those who bust the fences of convention: they are spellbound by the unrestricted adults . . .'

— Griffiths (2013: 97)

Carol Black writes at her [A Thousand Rivers \(http://carolblack.org/a-thousand-rivers\)](http://carolblack.org/a-thousand-rivers) essays site:

'We [relating to American culture] focus on our children directly and tell them exactly what we want them to know, where in many other societies adults expect children to observe their elders closely and follow their example voluntarily. We control and direct and measure our children's learning in excruciating detail, where many other societies assume children will learn at their own pace and don't feel it necessary or appropriate to control their everyday activities and choices. In other words, what we take for granted as a 'normal' learning environment is not at all normal to millions of people around the world.

' . . . the subculture of American institutional schooling . . . makes increasingly rigid demands on very young children and suppresses more and more of their natural energies and inclinations . . . Traits that would be valued in the larger American society — energy, creativity, independence — will get you into trouble in the classroom.'

Children buck against the system because it's in their nature to. It's also a reaction on their part, which is well-put by [Teacher Tom](http://teachertombsblog.blogspot.co.uk/2017/05/out-of-control-kids.html) (<http://teachertombsblog.blogspot.co.uk/2017/05/out-of-control-kids.html>), again highlighted via Arthur's blog:

'I fear [in some American schools, the approach of] make those schools even less free: even more like prisons . . . no-one will think to consider that the children's behaviour is a natural and predictable response to the cage in which they are forced to spend their days.'

Confirmation bias at play or actual reality, children are anti-system, I believe. For similar reasons, so too are playworkers. I've met enough to know that there's a general disdain (that's too mild!) for all the countless pointless weight of procedure, propaganda, bureaucracy, containment and, overall, inauthenticity out there. Who or what are playworkers really fighting for?

I came away from a soulless meeting this week, in which I was contained in a room with two other adults and we just went through a mechanic, robotic, charade of interactions, and I walked home feeling plenty weighed upon. I had my head down; I was minding my own business. Then the universe (or whatever mystic forces happened to pop into existence around me at that time) conspired to brighten everything: confirmation bias or not, whatever the case, I passed a woman and a small child of about three years of age. I don't know this child and can't think of anywhere that I might have met her. She caught my eye as I passed, and she smiled and waved at me. As I've said and written many, many times before, children just seem to 'get' certain adults. In such moments, there's an authenticity very much at play.

CATEGORY:

[CONNECTIVITY](#), [PLAYWORKINGS](#)

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[Speculations on the real and unreal of play](#)

November 14, 2017

It is with some degree of frustration that someone of a playworking disposition regularly hears the 'frivolity, or incidental nature, of play' rhetoric, inherent in various communication. It's not only in conversation with others that this perception takes place, but it can — in part — be traced within the

play literature too. More specifically, in this latter context, and although the current reading matter in question is pro-play (it's conversant with the idea that more is going on than may meet the eye), play can still have the tendency to be written in terms of contrasting the opinion of play as 'the not real' with 'the real world'. Although not lining up squarely with the idea of 'the frivolous', this unreal aspect can be seen as just as 'throwaway'.

The starting point for this post's writing (notwithstanding the general years-long 'unreal/real' contention having continued to be a background concern) is another of the regularly-cited offerings of play and playwork writers: Catherine Garvey's simply titled *Play* (originally published 1977; second edition 1991). In this book, Garvey posits the oft-cited five characteristics of play, these being: its pleasurable nature; that it has no extrinsic goals; its spontaneity; an involvement of active engagement; its systematic relations to what is not play (Garvey, 1991: 4). It is not, however, these characteristics, directly, that I'm looking to draw attention to with this post: it is to the idea of 'pretend' or 'make-believe' play that this post writing is concerned.

In a chapter entitled 'Play with Social Materials', Garvey (1991: 82) asks 'What is make-believe?' and she goes on to interchange this phrase with 'pretending', defining it as a 'voluntary transformation'. Further in to this chapter, she writes:

'... in the social conduct of pretending we can see the extent to which children conceive of the family as a system of relationships and as a complex of reciprocal actions and attitudes. Since make-believe enactments and themes reflect the child's notions of his world (though they do not copy them exactly), this aspect of play can provide a rich field for students and observers of social development.'

— Garvey (1991: 99)

Though there is the hint, in this paragraph, towards something not altogether faithfully and accurately reproduced in the children's play imitations of adults' actions, there is still the dominant rhetoric of 'play as practice', as perceived, or 'play as progress'. What if we were to take an entirely different angle? What if we were not to carry on referring to play as something 'pretend' or 'make-believe', unreal and essentially imitative? What if we stopped making such sharp contrasts between what we regularly suggest as 'the real world' and 'the unreal world of play'? So then, what if we were to start seeing play as the real world, or *a* real world, in its own right? (By extension, and just as a thought exercise, which I won't follow up here due to the scope of this writing, what if play were to be seen, routinely, as 'the real' and everything else — if we could make such a distinction — were a pale shadow?).

Before following the line of thought on 'play as a real world in its own right', a note of caution regarding culture as a perceived, and as a received, phenomenon: children are active participants and a part of any given culture and will assimilate the received dominant phrases and sometimes meanings of others, including adults, in their reflection of and addition to that culture — whether a child is using an adult concept in description of their own play, or whether it's a phrase of the subculture of the child-world, it's hard to say, but they can and do use words such as 'pretend' (where does a word or a meaning start?). To illustrate the point, I highlight here a study (Sandberg, 2002) referred to by Lester and Russell (2008: 215) 'regarding teacher intervention in children's play in Swedish preschool and after school settings'. Children's opinions are sought and some are quoted as saying that teachers 'cannot play pretend games' (Lester and Russell, 2008: 216).

It is to the idea of culture-as-perceived, rather than to culture-as-received (notwithstanding the reality that culture is not a one-way street of adult to child), as is potentially the case with the Swedish study above, that the playworking attitude is drawn: play is a real world in its own right, though operating

simultaneously and inextricably connected with other 'real worlds'. It is perceived here, and experienced by children, as real not pretend (even if potentially received adult descriptive terminology leaks in). The Garvey position quoted above does have its antithesis in the play and playwork literature; however, first a small spread of more play versus 'the real world' positions.

Lester and Russell (2008: 41), referring to how 'play provides children with a dimension that is unique and not replicable in other aspects of their lives', cite Bailey (2002):

*'... play is a way of experimenting with possible feelings and possible identities without risking the real biological or social consequences. Cut! Time for tea, time to go home — and nothing in **the real world** has changed, except perhaps that the child is not quite the same person ...'*

(Bold text: my emphasis).

In referring to an experiment conducted by Sylva (1976) on play, object manipulation and problem solving, Garvey (1991: 51) writes that '... those children who displayed nonliteral [sic] or imaginative behaviour prior to the task were the best problem solvers.'

I read the 'non-literal' here as referring to play/the unreal, and 'the task' as referring to the perceived-as-real world. Garvey later continues, in terms of play with language:

'[Children] use outrageous names, juxtapose improbable elements, invent unlikely events, retaining just enough sense of the real world to hold the fabrication together.'

— Garvey (1991: 71)

What is this 'real world' that these writers keep referring to? There is a connect in how people talk about play too: still there seems to be a preoccupation with play-as-practice, play-as-unreal, play in terms of developmental progress towards being able to perform tasks in 'the real world'; there is a distinction between 'this is time to play' and 'this is time to learn, do chores, engage in any other real-world situation'. There is, however, an antithesis to the unreal/real rhetoric buried within the literature.

Sutton-Smith (1997) writes on 'child phantasmagoria' — which he later elucidates by way of 'I use it [the phrase] to imply a bunch of incredible rubbish such as a wild mixture of irrealities, etc.' (Sutton-Smith, 2008) — and, notwithstanding the use of the word 'irreal' (with its 'illusory' context, though it is a step up on 'unreal'), he states that:

'Children's play fantasies are not meant only to replicate the world, nor to be only its therapy; they are meant to fabricate another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life, a life often much more emotionally vivid than mundane reality.'

— Sutton-Smith (1997: 158)

Play is *another* world: it isn't an 'unreal' world (though, Sutton-Smith contends that it is an 'irreal' world), it is another whole world that sits along with the mundane world. I would go further and say that play is a world that is inextricable from the mundane. Within the scope of this post though, play is a real world in its own right.

Sutton-Smith (1997: 166) goes on to suggest that 'children's own play society, because it is about their feelings about reality and not about direct representation of reality as such, is a deconstruction of that realistic society.'

Whilst this 'deconstruction' perspective is a welcome relief from the 'reconstruction' rhetoric that tends to dominate, it still doesn't totally tally with the culture-as-perceived, as I see it. To this end, we need to steer towards another stalwart of play and playwork literature: Johan Huizinga. To reach him, however, a quick detour back to Garvey (1991: 56), who writes that 'play generally reflects a *willing* suspension of disbelief' (original emphasis). I read this as the idea that there is a knowledge in the child of what is happening in the play (the 'unreal' in adult-speak), which can't possibly happen 'for real'/in 'the real world'.

Is this the case? Is it true that there's such a stark differentiation between 'what is play' and 'what is not' (what is 'unreal' and what is 'real') in the playing child's thinking? Yes, cultural appropriation of words such as 'pretend' filter through child-culture, but if you've ever seen a child talking in what adults think of as gibberish with another child then you might appreciate the sophistication of mutual understanding which is both 'pretend' and 'not pretend'. (I once spent a good part of an afternoon with a group of younger primary school children at play, communicating only in the language of 'monkey', and we all seemed to understand each other perfectly well enough).

So to Huizinga, whose writing on play and being I come back to time and again. Notwithstanding the use of the outdated word 'savage', Huizinga (1955: 25) writes: 'In his magic dance the savage *is* a kangaroo'.

It is in the area of religion and belief that Huizinga writes here. If faith is real to the believer, it's not too far a leap to see that play is real to the player. Huizinga goes on to state that: 'We express the relationship between him [the savage] and the animal he 'identifies' himself with as a 'being' for him but a 'playing' for us. He has taken on the 'essence' of the kangaroo, say we. The savage, however, knows nothing of the conceptual distinctions between 'being' and 'playing'; he knows nothing of 'identity', 'image' or 'symbol'.' (ibid).

He *is* the kangaroo. It's real: or, at least, in this perception as I describe it, it's real. It is, therefore, to this idea of perceiving what children do, perceiving them at play, in terms of perceiving not an 'unreal world' or a frivolous act, but a very real world, 'another world', a possible phantasmagoria in its own right, that I draw attention. Children might well attach adult-appropriated words in describing acts of their own devising, but 'pretend' is also real. It just takes a shift in stance to see it.

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CATEGORY:

ACADEMICA PLAYWORKINGS

TAGGED WITH:

4 COMMENTS

- ADULT IMPACT
- BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH
- CATHERINE GARVEY
- CHILDREN'S CULTURE
- JOHAN HUIZINGA
- MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY
- PERCEPTION
- PHANTASMAGORIA
- PLAYWORK
- PLAYWORKER
- PRETEND PLAY
- REAL WORLD

On approaches to play.

October 16, 2017

Having recently completed some study on a psychotherapist's perspective on- and engagement with- play, and having written a piece for a journal on what I discovered, my production editor contacted me to ask me to firm up one of my references. I'd fallen into the trap of quoting a well-worn offering, familiar to many play and playwork readers, and I'd not pinpointed the page of the original text, needing to flesh out my secondary reference. These oversights, because of the often-used quote, led me on a bit of an academic hunt which, in the fullness of time, has led me to the impetus to write today (ultimately — we'll get there soon enough) on 'play and learning'.

The page number I was asked to provide, and which I needed to trace, was for our old friend, the psychologist Mr. Jerome S. Bruner. It's for the quote that goes:

'Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity.'

— Bruner (1977: v)

It was the (v), or page five, of Bruner's writing in the introduction of Tizard and Harvey's (1977) *The biology of play* that I was looking for. Not being able to lay my hands on a copy of the Tizard and Harvey book, I had to source a copy of Janet R. Moyles' (1989) *Just playing?*. This book, the author of which is an educationalist, is the one that's referenced, regarding the Bruner quote, in the National Playing Fields Association's (2000) *Best play*. There's a trail that needed following here, and the secondary reference was the closest I could get. There though, in Moyles, was the all-important page number. (Here it is above, for anyone who may also be looking for it).

Linking to all of this, I'd just come back from a gathering of play, playwork and playworking (that is, as I define it, relating to the 'attitude') types in Bristol: playworkers and non-playworkers alike. One of the messages that seemed to strike a chord with a fair few people, from the conversations that took place, was a need for us (playwork people) to connect with our 'allies' who aren't necessarily in the playwork field. I don't take this as a call to battle, but as a call to realise that there are or may be crossovers in the great Venn diagram of common causes of those who work with, for, in support of, for the needs of, etc., children.

So, having just delved deeply into the writing of a psychotherapist in her perspectives on play, I thought it high time I actually read Moyles' book: Moyles being described in the biographical notes as a Professor of Education. I think it's fair to say that, if we (playworkers) stand back for a few moments, really stand back, we might just see ourselves as a group of relatively right-on lefties, eschewing everything that's deemed 'normal' in society because the recalcitrance of play is the 'real normal' which no-one else but us and children can see. We pride ourselves on occupying a special place, and some espouse the thinking that our goal should be to work to a point that we're no longer needed, to do ourselves out of work (I never fully bought into that, but I can appreciate the sentiment). If we stand back for a few moments, really stand back, who are we trying to kid? Do we need to climb out of our bubbles?

In Bristol, when talking about young men disaffected and disillusioned by unemployment in the Midlands, Simon Rix said a few words in particular that have just stuck with me: 'What am I *for*?' This can be taken, as I write, in the context of those young disillusioned men in their community, in the context of the playworker in reflection on themselves, and in the context of sewing up the threads of this post so far (Bruner's play as an approach to action, the suggestion of connecting with non-playwork allies on thinking about play, reading on play in terms of psychotherapy and education) . . . 'What is play *for*?'

Here I am in my thinking. When we read a work of fiction, we have to try to disconnect from our view of the world as we know it (that whole suspension of disbelief mechanism that must prevail if we're to fully immerse ourselves in that fiction). To a certain extent, I suppose, we also have to do this when reading academic texts which, on the face of it, don't tally neatly with our own worldviews. There can come a point, however, when that whole fragile suspension starts to fracture. For me, this came about around page 56 or so of Moyles' *Just playing?*.

She's writing from a specific perspective, the educationalist, it must be kept in mind, and she seems to have a genuine desire for the educational well-being of the children she writes about, but . . . poor play in this book: it's nothing but a means to an end. I haven't ever seen 'play as process' as meaning something akin to 'steps in order to achieve a goal' before, as is apparently proper to the dictionary definitions, as this book seems to define it (despite Moyles' championing of 'free play' — whatever that is, because I do wonder if play is only play when it's 'free', as opposed to Moyles' teacher-conceptualised 'directed play', which surely can't be seen as 'play', really, can it? Those right-on leftie

playworkers are getting all purist again!). Poor play is a means to an end here and my suspension of the playworker worldview kind of fractured at or about the following point, in which Moyles writes (in relation to children solving problems through play):

'Vandenberg (1986) sees children's play as a potentially valuable natural resource that can be used to develop creative individuals who will be the source of technological innovation so necessary for our economic survival, suggesting the use of children's play as the foundation for meeting society's future demands . . .'

— Moyles (1989: 56)

I read on, nevertheless, though I was troubled and, twenty pages or so later, my faith in allies was wavering more with the following (in relation to children and creativity):

'Pre-planning of the experiences adults wish children to have is essential if learning within the school context is to be appropriately tailored to children's development and needs.'

— Moyles (1989: 77)

My discomfort lies in the feel of soft and hard control, depending on the circumstances, perceived as inherent in the act of teaching, as described. Yes, there are some damn fine teachers out there, I'm sure — standard caveat — teachers who care and are good at what they do and who are loved by the children they teach; however, this writing is rather geared towards the 'use of play', the idea, than the individual who attempts to slot it into their metaphorical toolkit.

I'm not sure how much people believe me, or hear me, when I repeat my thinking that learning has a habit of coming from play, sure, but that children, by and large, don't go into their play specifically to learn. Children might go into their play 'just to play', to 'muck about', to 'cock about', to 'be daft', to 'get away from stuff', to 'be quiet', to 'go mad', or any number of reasons, including to 'find out'. There is, however, a qualitative difference, I suggest, between 'finding out' and 'learning', in the context of everything above: one is self-initiated, self-motivated; the other is imposed, albeit potentially or actually with good intentions. Children might find out stuff via their play, but they do it on their own terms. The idea of 'using play' in 'pre-planning of the experiences adults wish children to have' is a little troublesome.

Notwithstanding anything else that Bruner may or may not have thought and written, and taking his often-quoted line initially at face value, play is an approach to action, not a form of activity. What is play for? Play is for now — Kilvington and Wood (2010) read Bruner's line as 'it's not what you do but the way that you do it that makes it play', and it is to this interpretation rather than Moyles' presumed connection of 'approach' with process towards a goal/product — 'play *must* be viewed as a process' (Moyles, 1989: 11) — that I gravitate.

When I teach (adults) in the on-going pursuit of ways of seeing play, I don't now go out to deny that learning can come of that play. I'm comfortable with the idea that here are resources, here is 'play stuff', and what comes of it is what the children make of it, and what comes of it may be something they didn't know before. Children's 'needs' aren't, however, necessarily always those that adults think they are. Children may well not go into their play with the thinking that adults suppose they should have ('caring and sharing', for example), and they don't necessarily have the will to be impressed upon by what adults consider important learning opportunities.

At home recently, Princess K. and Viking Boy have had sudden urges to work out how to make and shoot longbows from flexing stripped-off branches and lengths of elastic, with thin garden cane as arrows; they've wanted to talk about tsunamis and earthquakes, and make 'how to' lists of their own devising for paper maché and squeezing orange juice. This playworking me has only provided the spark, unintentionally, for some pieces of this, pre-planning none of these experiences, trying to read the unfolding situation, staying in or stepping out of the way, as needed (sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding): working *with* play, not perceiving it as 'using play'.

I am mindful here of the isolationist, holier-than-thou stance that a group of playworkers, or a playworker, or those of a playworking disposition can be seen to operate with (though I also read the same in Moyles' treatment of the perceived-as necessariness of an educationalist). There may well be 'allies' in other related fields, but we shall have to agree to meet more in the middle (or, at least, get as far as possible into individual examples of one another's respective literature bases first, before the suspension of disbelief fractures). Is the literature of playworkers wide enough? Likewise, is there enough breadth in the literature of the educationists, the psychotherapists . . .? How much crossover is, or should there, be?

(The study and discussion on) play is an (on-going) approach to action.

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CATEGORY:

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- MOYLES
- NATIONAL PLAYING FIELDS ASSOCIATION
- NPEA
- PLAYWORK
- PLAYWORKER
- SCHOOL
- TEACHING
- TIZARD AND HARVEY

Reflections of a jobbing playworker: part 3 of 3

September 13, 2017

Continuing the observations and reflections on play and playwork practice from the summer just gone.

Parachuting playworkers and parents

There are many, many ways for a parachute to benefit the play. There are also many ways for the adults near the parachute to benefit (or not) the play as well. The large colourful affair was a standard piece of our kit wherever we went this summer: in the parks and halls of the villages, at the festivals, at the youth pavilion. Sometimes the play naturally morphed into the standard set of parachute games (it sometimes feels like the set list of a gig: not that it's a lack of imagination on the part of the playworkers, it's just that the children seem to want/know the same games). Sometimes, at certain sites, the parachute has good times to be brought out, something different, something new (the wind can bring this thinking on, or it can be flapped to say 'this is a playable place'). On some occasions it was good to see parents come over, pick up the edge of the parachute when they saw something starting to happen, and go with the flow as children ran underneath or around it. It's entirely possible for a group of disparate adults who've never met each other before to fall into an organic and co-operative motion and knowledge of what's happening and why. The why is the children's play.

There is the opposite too, of course. One day, we'd laid the parachute out at the widest part of the playable area at a festival (nominally the entrance to the children's dedicated enclosed area, though it was right in front of the chemical toilets, which wasn't ideal!). Nothing organised was happening, and it was fine. A woman came over though, quite forcibly, and she picked up the parachute and proceeded to instruct a child to play. The child went with it, and he didn't seem too perturbed (perhaps he was used to it). Some of the playworkers came over to hold the parachute too, in support, though we said nothing. The woman was irritating me a little, I admit, but the child was playing, and it became his play, of sorts, so I didn't intervene. After ten minutes or so, the woman decided that the play was done. Off she went with her child. I don't remember seeing her again. Perhaps I should have said something; perhaps it all ended up fine, or sort of fine, in the end.

At the pavilion, a few days later, it was a windy day. I was working as the only playworker outside on the grass. I brought out the parachute and spread it out on the ground. I didn't really think I'd be doing 'games' because it didn't look and feel like that type of a session. A group of younger children played underneath the parachute and, without really realising how, I was then involved. The children seemed to enjoy running down the centre of the barrel shape that the parachute made as I lifted it from one end.

The wind was the only support I needed there. We ran the parachute down the field, going with the wind, turned and ran it back with the children running underneath it as it billowed. They shouted at me to let it go, so I did. It flew and they chased it. 'Again, again,' they shouted. So we did it all again, and again, and again.

I can't leave the subject of parachutes without making reference to my younger playwork colleague (she of the non-gloop childhood) who, one day in a village hall, as we were trying to make what we call a 'mushroom' shape with the parachute, did something just amazing and small and beautiful. We only had a handful of children with us at the parachute so it was a little tricky getting enough lift to billow the fabric up (even though we had a couple of parents with us too). I decided that, if we stepped forwards a little as we lifted, this would give that little bit of oomph that we needed to float the parachute: except, I decided this in my head and I didn't say it out loud! As I stepped forward, from the corner of my eye I saw her watching me carefully. She stepped forward with me. The parachute lifted up high. It's a small thing, but it was important in the moment.

Holding patterns

I've been reminded again this summer, on occasions, of what it means to 'hold the play frame' for a child or group of children. Or, rather, I've been thinking about ways in which an adult may be in service to the play by keeping it viable (not controlling it but just being the glue for a while). Some children have bounced their play ideas off of me, or sought quiet affirmation that 'this use, with this thing' is not against some rules, or sometimes they've played out their ideas including me, through me, around me. Occasionally, I've reflected that I was the glue for several play frames (or bubbles of play in the metaphor I've used before), from different children, playing different things, all at the same time. This is no easy task. If the chosen playworker isn't there to maintain the viability of the play, the play doesn't happen in the way the child is indicating they want it to. If the playworker stays too long in the play, it stops being the thing it was or was intended to be, and could become play disagreeable to the child or children, or it could become the play of the playworker. I don't know what this says if the playworker finds themselves in an almost constant state of holding the meaning of the play, or being the mirror, or the glue, or whatever metaphor is preferred, for two or three hours almost non-stop. I do know that to do it right, it needs judgement.

When adults play

When children come to a site where I've brought the play stuff, I quite often say to the parents who come along too that 'adults can play too.' Now, on the one hand, this play stuff is not for the adults; it's for the children. On the other hand, however, there is some benefit in (a) children and parents playing together (provided, I think, that the parents don't take over the play or direct it), and (b) adults being made comfortable with the fact that, just because they're adults now, their play-engagement doesn't have to be over. By saying to parents, 'you can play too', I hope this starts to break down any preconceived notion that children do xyz and adults do something else. I also hope that they can start to interact with their children at these sessions on terms which they might not necessarily have done before.

At one park, I remember, we had just a small group of younger children with us but we'd spread all the making and sticking and cutting and so forth stuff out on the tarp on the grass. A couple of the parents sat there too and all the adults chatted as the children played and, somewhere along the line, I felt, the parents started playing too. It was respectful of their children's creations (the children were busy smooshing up clay and playdough and jamming beads and googly eyes into it all!), and the parents weren't telling the children what and how to make things. The parents made their own things, almost as if their hands were doing things independent of their conversations. It was good to see.

Observation of adult engagement with play was a little different at one of the festivals. We didn't have such arts and crafts play stuff out on the main strip between the designated children's area and the coffee stalls and such like, but we did have a long skipping rope! I've long known that adults don't particularly enjoy the idea, generally speaking, of participating in what they perceive as 'children's play', at least not in public view! (It's strange then that those same adults are quite happy to dance at the bandstand, to dress up as if it were normal day-to-day attire, and to engage in the cultural or religious play of devotion, worship, prayer and such like at the stone circle). So, maybe we were being a little provocative and playing for ourselves when we decided to stretch the long skipping rope half-way across the main strip: those walking up the slope along the well-worn track would need to either engage with the rope or walk around it. Plenty walked around it. I do remember one young couple walking by though and the woman, who was probably no more than in her early twenties, looked at us as if to suggest a question. We nodded and she seemed pleased to be given the opportunity to skip for a short while. Adults sometimes need more than just a rope strung across the grass to accept the invitation to play.

Children, by contrast, can often see a rope and make decisions of their next actions based on different starting points: this rope is here for me if I want to use it or not. The children on the main strip of grass soon somersaulted over it, limbo danced under it, jumped it, skipped as we swung it.

This all said, over the summer there was plenty of adult play observed (either after explicit permissions given, as above, or of those adults' own accord): lots of use of poi (either the ribbon-tailed, or water poi, or glow in the dark variety); making and crafting (under the guise of it being a 'workshop'); rituals and celebrations; dancing and singing; playing instruments at the bandstand in what looked and felt like spontaneous groups, comings-together; drinking beer, of course! The thing is, though, and I think I may be largely right here, though I will stand corrected if not, I'd dare say it was only the playworkers (or the play-literate/play-mentality adults) who did or would call this all 'play', their own play. In the world of 'being adult', all of the above (and other examples) are known by different names: celebration, festival, ritual, healing, relaxation, recreation, hobby, pastime, sport . . . really though, they're all play, and that's not a bad word to call it.

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