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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Play in(g) international theory

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Abstract

While the study of games and gaming has increased in International Relations in recent years, a corresponding exploration of play has yet to be developed in the field. While play features in several key areas – including game theory, videogames and popular culture, and pedagogical role-plays and simulations – little work has been done to analyse its presence in, and potentials for, the discipline. The aim of this article is to introduce the study of play to IR. It does this by demonstrating that play is political, and that it is at work across the global arena. Drawing on the deconstructive tradition associated with Jacques Derrida, its core contribution is a theorisation of play. The central argument developed is that play is (auto)deconstructive. By this I mean (1) that play precipitates an unravelling of any attempt at its conceptualisation, and (2) that this illustrates the value of a deconstructive approach to international theory. This claim is substantiated through an analysis of four key binary oppositions derived from Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Having shown how play powerfully deconstructs its own conceptual foundations, I argue that a playful approach offers a robust challenge to entrenched assumptions in international theory.

Keywords: Play; Games; International Theory; Deconstruction; Jacques Derrida

Introduction

As part of the broader turn to the study of popular culture, aesthetics, and affect, International Relations (IR) is finally taking the study of games and gaming seriously. Perhaps surprisingly, however, no corresponding theorisation of play has been developed in the discipline. While play features in a number of key areas in the field – for example in game theory, videogames and wargames, and pedagogical role-plays and simulations – little work has been done to explore its potentials for global politics or theory. This article argues that play is political, and that it is at work across the global arena. Focusing on its place in international theory as a starting point for future research, I provide a theorisation of play that draws upon the deconstructive tradition associated with Jacques Derrida. The article's core claim is that play is (auto)deconstructive. By this I mean (1) that play precipitates an unravelling of any attempt at its conceptualisation, and (2) that this helpfully illustrates the value of a deconstructive approach to international theory. This claim is substantiated through analysis of four key binary oppositions derived from Johan Huizinga's seminal text *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Having shown how play powerfully and fruitfully deconstructs its own conceptual foundations, I conclude that a playful approach has the potential to do this in the context of international theory.

The article proceeds in three stages. Initially, it reviews the conceptual literature, noting a transdisciplinary gap on the question of the politics of play. It then identifies three key areas in which play is at work in global politics/IR: play as everyday practice; play as resistance; and play as subjectification. From there it develops a theorisation of play utilising Jacques Derrida's

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thought. The aim of this theorisation is to demonstrate that play is (auto)deconstructive by interrogating four key binary oppositions derived from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.[1] I have chosen this as the basis upon which to develop my argument because it is widely held to be the foundational text for the academic study of play,[2] and because this centrality has informed much of the study of play across the social sciences and humanities through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. According to Huizinga, in order to count as play, an activity must: be distinct from real life, be free/voluntary, not be serious, not be work, generate no material profits, be an end in itself, and not be based on reason.[3] I use these criteria to formulate four binaries through which play is conceptualised in the foundational literature: reality/irreality; seriousness/frivolity; productive/pointless; and reason/unreason. Deconstructing each in turn, I argue that while play is ordinarily assumed to fit into the devalued end of these binaries (the second term in each case), when examined more closely it serves to disrupt them in important ways. The consequence of this is that while play's paradoxical non/conformity frustrates stable conceptualisation in binary terms, this very dis/obedience allows us to glimpse play's place in, and exciting potentials for, international theory.

The state of play in IR

Beyond its metaphorical deployment in explorations of the roles 'played' by specific actors, institutions, and forces in world politics, examinations of play in IR are frequently limited to the sphere of games and gaming. Commercial videogames are currently the most widely researched genre in the discipline; a small but growing community of scholars has explored the politics, militarism, exceptionalism, and violence of contemporary videogame content and culture, as well as the affirmatory and emancipatory potentials of this medium.[4] In parallel, the use of games and simulations as pedagogical tools in IR has been the focus of important articles.[5] The military applications of gaming have been explored to a lesser extent in the discipline, with the exception

[1]Other scholars have discussed binary relations of this kind, which utilise and in some cases amend Huizinga's principles, including Stuart L. Brown and Christopher C. Vaughan, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Avery, 2010); Roger Caillois and Meyer Barash, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Mechthild Nagel, *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002); Emily Ryall, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[2]Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*; Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 3; Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 2, fn. 6; James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), pp. 1–6; Mihai Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 2, fn. 2.

[3]Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016).

[4]Helen Berents and Brendan Keogh, 'Virtuous, virtual, but not visceral: (Dis)embodied viewing in military-themed videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, 6:3 (2018), pp. 366–9; Michelle Lee Brown, '(Re)coding the comic holotrope of survivance', *Transmotion*, 3:1 (2017), p. 23; Felix Ciută, 'Call of Duty: Playing video games with IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:2 (2016), pp. 197–215; Craig Hayden, 'The procedural rhetorics of *Mass Effect*: Video games as argumentation in International Relations', *International Studies Perspectives* (2016); Nick Robinson, 'Videogames, persuasion and the war on terror: Escaping or embedding the military entertainment complex?', *Political Studies*, 60:3 (2012), pp. 504–22; Nick Robinson, 'Have you won the war on terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 450–70; Nick Robinson, 'Militarism and opposition in the living room: the case of military videogames', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:3 (2016), pp. 255–75; Mark B. Salter, 'The geographical imaginations of video games: Diplomacy, civilization, America's Army and Grand Theft Auto IV', *Geopolitics*, 16:2 (2011), pp. 359–88.

[5]Victor Asal, 'Playing games with International Relations', *International Studies Perspectives*, 6:3 (2005), pp. 359–73; Victor Asal and Jayson Kratoville, 'Constructing International Relations simulations: Examining the pedagogy of IR simulations through a constructivist learning theory lens', *Journal of Political Science Education*, 9:2 (2013), pp. 132–43; Laura Horn, Olivier Rubin, and Laust Schouenborg, 'Undead pedagogy: How a zombie simulation can contribute to teaching International Relations', *International Studies Perspectives* (2015); Nicolas de Zamaróczy, 'Are we what we play? Global politics in historical strategy computer games', *International Studies Perspectives* (2016); Michael Lee and Zachary C. Shirkey, 'Going beyond the existing consensus: the use of games in International Relations education', *Political Science & Politics*,

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of the work of James der Derian[6] and Antoine Bousquet.[7] Beyond but pertinent to IR, important studies have engaged with racialised and colonial dimensions of gaming in the field of Games Studies[8] and Media and Communication.[9] And engagements from a range of disciplines have provided insightful philosophical explorations of games and gaming.[10]

Despite this interest, however, no corresponding theorisation of play has been developed in the discipline. Calls to take play seriously have issued from scholars such as Maria Mälksoo, who argues for 'the return of play in the scholarship and practice of IR'.[11] Mark Salter has also raised the question of play, claiming that when

> IR theorists invoke the 'rules of the game' or game theory as a frame for systematically separating agents from structures, and the conditions of possibility for politics, they are limiting the bounds of play – ascribing a set of primarily social conventions (rules) to an abstract structure of world politics (the game). Play and these ludological tropes are as vital to our political imagination as a self-styled 'serious' reading of politics.[12]

In addition, play appears in IR debates as a metaphor for the movements of poststructural language games and deconstruction, as noted by Michael Dillon,[13] Nick Vaughan-Williams,[14] and Mark Hoffman.[15] Play thus features both concretely and allegorically in several ways in the discipline, but there remains a need for a focused exploration distinct from the study of gaming at both conceptual and practical levels. The core aim of this article is to situate play in international theory, understood as the field of study concerned with transposing and building upon the tools of political theory in the global arena.

A lack of sustained scholarly attention to play is not unique to IR. As a consequence of its supposed frivolity, significant resistance to the academic study of play persists across the human and social sciences.[16] This is because play is conventionally framed as the opposite of seriousness, and commonly associated with the recreational activities of children[17] or the irrational behaviours of animals.[18] When considered as an adult activity, play is frequently treated as the

50:2 (2017), pp. 571–5; Amandine Orsini, 'Short games series as new pedagogical tools: the International Relations games show', *European Political Science*, 17:3 (2018), pp. 494–518.

[6]James Der Derian, 'The Desert of the Real and the simulacrum of war', *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 84:5 (2008), pp. 931–48; James Der Derian, 'War as game', *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 10:1 (2003), pp. 37–48; James Der Derian, 'The simulation syndrome: From war games to game wars', *Social Text*, 24 (1990), pp. 187–92.

[7]Antoine Bousquet, 'Wargames', in Robin Mackay (ed.), *Simulation, Exercise, Operations* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2015).

[8]Sybille Lammes and Stephanie de Smale, 'Hybridity, reflexivity and mapping: a collaborative ethnography of postcolonial gameplay', *Open Library of Humanities*, 4:1 (2018); Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Post-Colonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillian, 2017).

[9]Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[10]Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[11]Maria Mälksoo, 'The challenge of liminality for International Relations theory', *Review of International Studies*, 38:2 (2012), p. 492.

[12]In Xavier Guillaume (ed.), 'The international as an everyday practice', *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), p. 453.

[13]Michael Dillon, 'Intelligence incarnate: Martial corporeality in the digital age', *Body & Society*, 9:4 (2003), p. 25.

[14]Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'International Relations and the "problem of history"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:1 (2005), pp. 115–36.

[15]Mark Hoffman, 'Restructuring, reconstruction, reinscription, rearticulation: Four voices in critical international theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20:2 (1991), pp. 169–85.

[16]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 208.

[17]Tara Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies: Not merely child's play', *Geography Compass*, 6:6 (2012), pp. 313–26.

[18]Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

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opposite of work,[19] science,[20] and reason.[21] As James S. Hans notes, when we consider adult play we 'tend to connect the word to leisure-time activities and to the less significant aspects of our lives'.[22] As Lori Ducharme and Gary Alan Fine similarly argue, 'play is generally regarded as a time-out behaviour, … set off from serious, everyday activity'.[23] This has led to play being 'relegated to a minor and peripheral role'[24] and a general 'malediction of play'[25] in Western culture and scholarship.

Despite this transdisciplinary marginalisation, pockets of scholars in fields as diverse as Classics, English, Geography, Philosophy, Psychology, History, Social/Political Theory, and Folklore have collectively generated a vibrant literature exploring play, and founded several professional organisations dedicated to its study.[26] These scholars argue, in the words of Jacques Ehrmann, that the 'time has come to treat play seriously'.[27] Indeed, play's importance for social and political life is difficult, they claim, to overstate: 'far from being a peripheral activity, play is the most essential category of human experience, the activity we constantly turn to without knowing it'.[28] Challenging claims that it is merely the preserve of children, Tara Woodyer argues that play 'is fundamental to human experience across the life course'.[29] As such, it 'is an essential element of man's ideological makeup, a basic existential phenomenon'.[30] Read in this way, play is vital, in both senses of the word. According to Eugene Fink, 'the mode of play is that of spontaneous act, of vital impulse. Play is, at it were, existence centred in itself.'[31] Brian Massumi appears to concur, stating that the 'ludic gesture is *a vital gesture*'.[32] So powerful is play's vital quality, according to Stuart Brown (founder of the National Institute on Play), that

> play can save your life … Life without play is a grinding, mechanical existence organized around doing things necessary for survival. Play is the stick that stirs the drink. It is the basis of all art, games, books, sports, movies, fashion, fun, and wonder – in short, the basis of what we think of as civilization. Play is the vital essence of life. It is what makes life lifey.[33]

As such, according to Hans, 'play is the most meaningful of human activities, the one that continually produces the world in which man lives'.[34] As this suggests, an absence of play has potentially serious consequences for political and social life. As Brown argues, when 'we stop playing, we stop developing, and when that happens, the laws of entropy take over – things fall apart. When we stop playing, we start dying.'[35]

[19]Michael Oriard, *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 356.

[20]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. 3.

[21]Hackett, in Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 125.

[22]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. xi.

[23]In Ronald Bogue and Mihai Spariosu (eds), *The Play of the Self*, SUNY Series: the Margins of Literature (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 99.

[24]Hans, *The Play of the World,* p. xi.

[25]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*.

[26]These include the Association for the Study of Play (TASP), the International Council for Children's Play (ICCP), the Association for the Child's Right to Play, the Association for Play Therapy, and the National Institute on Play.

[27]Jacques Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 5.

[28]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. xiii.

[29]Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies', p. 322.

[30]Fink, in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 19.

[31]Ibid., p. 20.

[32]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 8.

[33]Cited by Feezell in Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play, p. 14.*

[34]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. vi.

[35]Brown and Vaughan, *Play*, p. 73.

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A key theme that remains under-researched in this literature, and which is especially pertinent to IR, is the question of the politics of play. Some note has been made of this issue; Brian Sutton-Smith, for instance, claims that play's supposed frivolity might usefully be read as reflection of what is deemed 'politically suitable for some dominating groups',[36] while Mechthild Nagel draws attention to the 'ideological agendas' at work in philosophical delimitations of '*what* gets excluded and *who* is not allowed to play'.[37] Salter also raises this point in his statement that we 'must understand the signification of international relations to be a play of meanings between the structure and the sign, but also the meaning of play as a way of instantiating the international structure and the sign of sovereignty'.[38] Addressing this transdisciplinary gap, this article argues that play is political, and that it is at work across the global landscape. To substantiate these claims, the remainder of this section explores three interrelated areas in which play features centrally in global politics/IR: play as everyday practice; play as resistance; and play as subjectification.

Play as everyday practice

Over the last decade, IR has become increasingly concerned with the everyday as a site of political praxis. Scholars associated with this 'practice turn' have argued that because everyday activities are 'the stuff that drives the world and makes it "hang together", the everyday practices of diplomats, terrorists, environmentalists, or financial analysts become the object of investigation'.[39] These everyday practices are important for IR because they offer new insights into the construction and circulation of knowledge: 'they situate knowledge in practice and thereby develop a unified account of knowing and doing … Connecting "practice", "acting", and "knowing" implies understanding knowledge as "knowing from within".'[40] Furthermore, they create space for a focus on agency that resists IR's tendency to privilege state and institutional actors. As a ubiquitous practice that rests upon complex individual and collective relationships, play provides fertile ground upon which to explore everyday global politics. Play occurs across state borders and cleavages of class, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. While play forms are, of course, often specific to time, place, and culture, play as such is truly global. Indeed, as will be explored below, play is seen by many as productive of social and political life, and as key to many forms of situated knowledge. Indeed, as Miguel Sicart notes, some argue that play is itself a 'way of knowledge'.[41]

Everyday play occurs across the global arena. On both individual and collective bases, play is a key element of a host of activities and practices related to fun, relaxation, and escape from the compulsions of labour and order.[42] In its recreational forms, play features in activities as diverse as video- and analogue games; carnivals, festivals and dance; sports and contests; and make-believe and storytelling. As such, play forms a key part of how ordinary people the world over spend their non-working time. Play is also used for more 'serious' purposes across the global political landscape, including child and adult education, and medical and therapeutic treatments. Outside the civilian domain, play is in evidence in military institutions, for instance in simulations used in training regimes and for passing 'downtime' on deployment. In addition, veterans' organisations and rehabilitation centres use play to build communities and promote suicide prevention among ex-service members.

[36]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play,* p. 207.

[37]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 1.

[38]Salter in Guillaume (ed.), 'The international as an everyday practice', p. 455.

[39]Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, 'The play of international practice', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), p. 449.

[40]Ibid., p. 453.

[41]Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2014), p. 86.

[42]Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 11.

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Play is thus used on an everyday basis provide relief from the pressures of both civilian and military life. This is because, as Brown notes, '[play is] fun. It makes you feel good. It provides psychological arousal … It is a cure for boredom.' In play, he continues, we 'stop worrying about whether we look good or awkward, smart or stupid. We stop thinking about the fact that we are thinking.'[43] As such, these examples of everyday play provide interesting insights into the exercise of agency. On the one hand, play and playfulness serve to punctuate the apparent rigidity of wage labour and military service, creating space for experiences less overdetermined by prevailing power relations. As Sicart explains, '[t]o be playful is to appropriate a context that is not created or intended for play … Appropriation implies a shift in the way a particular technology or situation is interpreted. The most usual transformation is from functional or goal oriented to pleasurable or emotionally engaging.'[44] In this reading, as an everyday site of global politics, play occurs in time and space different from those governed by wage labour and bureaucratic orders, illuminating through agential practice activities and logics beyond those governing people's working lives. On the other hand, to the extent that players stop thinking about thinking when at play, agency is potentially compromised. As a site of everyday politics, then, an analysis of play generates interesting lines of inquiry relating to questions of agency and praxis.

Play as resistance

As this suggests, a second key element of play for IR is its role in sites and practices of political contestation and resistance. Play is an important element of many types of social movements and activist interventions, taking such forms as visual artworks, performances, occupations, publications, dress-up, and spectacle. In the Western world, this is perhaps best illustrated by the Situationist movement of the mid-twentieth century[45] and its more recent inheritors.[46] In a process Richard Barbrook calls 'ludic subversion', participants of the Situationist International of the late 1950s used play to generate and convey radical political ideas through such media as industrial painting, altering existing pictures, experimental films, seditious graffiti, self-published journals, and collaged books.[47] The centrality of play to the Situationist movement was due, Barbrook continues, to their belief that it is 'the radical antithesis of alienated labour'.[48] As Sadie Plant explains, 'for the Situationists, glimpses of authentic experience are present in moments of artistic expression, political struggle, and self-absorbed play; alienation is the experience of removal and absence, the supersession of which is experienced in the practice of the conscious creation of situations'.[49]

For groups seeking to resist global phenomena like the arms trade, climate change, or the rise of the far right today, play and playfulness can be important tools. In his study of British anti-militarist movements, Chris Rossdale explores the playful elements of the Space Hijackers, a group of contemporary situationists, noting that their interventions can be read as 'an invitation to play a game, to subvert easy narratives of security and insecurity and revel in the (tragic) comedy, in absurdity'. Their activities, he continues, show 'how playfulness can operate as a subversive practice that reveals and exploits the instabilities of apparently stable concepts without imposing new ones'. Such play 'demonstrates the violence of the state's (dis)order and (in)security

[43]Brown and Vaughan, *Play*, p. 17.

[44]Sicart, *Play Matters*, p. 27.

[45]Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames: Ludic Subversion against Spectacular Capitalism* (Wivenhoe; New York and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2014); Sadie Plant, 'The situationist international: a case of spectacular neglect', *Radical Philosophy*, 55:summer (1990), pp. 3–10; Owen Worth and Carmen Kuhling, 'Counter-hegemony, anti-globalisation and culture in International Political Economy', *Capital and Class*, 84 (2004), pp. 31–42.

[46]For an exploration of contemporary Situationist-inspired anti-militarist activity, see Chris Rossdale, *Resisting Militarism: Direct Action and the Politics of Subversion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[47]Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, p. 56.

[48]Ibid., p. 63.

[49]Plant, 'The situationist international', p. 9.

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while affirming a creative politics of dis/order and in/security'.[50] Play can thus resist elements of prevailing material and organisational orders in ways that relate directly to IR's interest in political contestation and resistance.

In addition to such concrete resistances – indeed, underpinning them – play can unsettle conceptual and ideological norms. For example, as Theodor Adorno notes, logics of substitutability and exchange are disrupted in children's play because they are 'still aware, in their spontaneous perception, of the contradiction between phenomenon and fungibility that the resigned adult no longer sees, and they shun it'. He continues:

> Play is their defence. The unerring child is struck by the peculiarity of the equivalent forms … In his purposeless activity the child, by a subterfuge, sides with use-value against exchange value. Just because he deprives the things with which he plays of their mediated usefulness, he seeks to rescue in them what is benign toward men …[51]

At the interrelated levels of conceptual and material resistance, then, play can serve as a disruptive force in global politics. In Sicart's analysis, reflecting this claim, play can be read 'as a struggle against efficiency, seriousness, and technical determinism'.[52] Because of its processual quality, play can serve to disrupt entrenched assumptions and apparent givens. This is politically salient because, as Emmanual Lévinas argued, 'political totalitarianism rests on ontological totalitarianism'.[53] When read in this manner, play has the capacity to be a(nta)gonistic to forces of order, rationalism, and bureaucracy.

Play as subjectification

Finally, play is at work in IR in explorations of identity and subject-production, which have formed a key part of feminist, poststructural, postcolonial, queer, and other critical interventions in the field. In addition to its resistant capacities, play is also generative. As, Sicart notes, we should read play 'not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production'.[54] Through these productive characteristics, play can be read as at work in individual and collective identity, understood in processual terms. Key to any analysis of play is the question of who plays. Some have argued that play is a universal activity among humans. Resonating with post-human IR scholarship,[55] others go further, noting that play occurs in many animal species.[56] Perhaps more interesting than speculations about universality is the question of the self in play, or put differently, who one is when one plays and how one is produced through play. Play is aligned with, and provides a useful vocabulary for, theoretical traditions in IR that seek to explore modes of becoming that problematise and resist concrete Being. This is because play invites an exploration of the disrupted and processual character of subjectivity. As Fink notes, in play we find a particular kind of schizophrenia, a split personality, because the player is divided into the self who plays and the self created through play.[57]

Sutton-Smith argues that play is ambiguous. I would amend this slightly to suggest that play ambiguates; because play is characterised by movement and process, as opposed to existing in a static form, and because this movement has productive effects on the actors and objects it

[50]Rossdale, *Resisting Militarism*, pp. 125–6.

[51]Theodor W. Adorno and E. F. N. Jephcott, *Minima moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 228.

[52]Sicart, *Play Matters*, p. 5.

[53]Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 206.

[54]Sicart, *Play Matters*, p. 5.

[55]Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations: Complexity, Ecologism and Global Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

[56]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*.

[57]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 23.

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touches, play takes the ordinary and the given and changes them into something qualitatively different. This disruptive capacity, I suggest, runs as deep as the production of individual and collective identities. In this reading, play, for better or worse, has a hand in the becoming of subjects, but can also be used to punctuate and disrupt existing subject norms through its processual movements. Accordingly, coming to grips with play is a fruitful means by which the widespread Cartesian anxieties at work in rationalist approaches may be brought to light and worked through. As Hans notes, there is only one logical explanation for the enduring fear of play in rationalist philosophy: 'fear for the "self," for that "identity" which supposedly defines us. Seen as identity, in play we always place the whole of identity into question, and that seems too great a risk to take.'[58]

None of this is to suggest that play is always politically progressive or emancipatory. As the Situationists observed of the Surrealists, radical playful interventions can be quickly recuperated by hegemonic forces.[59] Indeed in some cases the distinction between work and play has been eroded significantly; as McKenzie Wark notes, for some '[w]ork becomes play … You have to be a team player. Your work has to be creative, inventive, playful – ludic … Play becomes everything to which it was once opposed. It is work, it is serious; it is morality, it is necessity.'[60] Sutton-Smith further cautions that play as a form of power relations is referred to by many names, including 'warfare, hegemony, conflict, competition, glory, manliness, contest, and resistance'.[61] This suggests a further possible line of scholarly enquiry: the cooptation of play by forms of global order. The rise of militarised videogames would be a case in point here.

And yet, there are good reasons for looking to play for signs of, and possibilities for, resistance to hegemonic forces of order and Being in global politics. While it cannot not guard against the play of domination, as Mukherjee notes, play offers scope for subversion:

> [P]lay is a crucial factor in disrupting the centres of the structured colonial notions of progress … Playing at colonialism can also turn into the subversion of colonialism … The multiple possibility-spaces of play are the site of both the Great Game of empire and its opposite, play as the disruption of the colonial chronicle of progress.

Part of the reason for play's resistant possibilities as that its processual character tends away from domination towards the productive.[62] This fluidity, Ryall et al. note, contains an openness with 'liberatory potential'.[63] To this extent, play as a site of ethical possibility is a key area of interest for IR. Having established that play is political and that it permeates the global arena, this article now turns to establishing its importance for international theory. Because of its disruptive processual character, I argue that play is (auto)deconstructive, and this that has salutary consequences for international theory.

Play in(g) international theory

The importance of play for social and political life has attracted the attention of a diverse range of theorists working across the humanities and social sciences. While this literature varies greatly in scope and focus, one point of agreement is that the standard scholarly tools furnished by reason, science, and philosophy are not well suited to the study of play. In Fink's words, play 'is a phenomenon for which there are no adequate criteria at hand'.[64] Concurring with this sentiment,

[58]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. 187.
[59]Barbrook, *Class Wargames*, p. 56.
[60]Wark, *Gamer Theory*, p. 11.
[61]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 75.
[62]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. 186.
[63]Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 9.
[64]Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 25.

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Sutton-Smith describes play as fundamentally ambiguous,[65] while for Spariosu it is amphibolous.[66] This ambiguity is reflected in play being variously analysed as behaviour or activity; motive, attitude, or state of mind; form or structure; meaningful experience; and ontologically distinct phenomenon,[67] and in the frequent use of metaphor and allusion in scholarly analyses. Sutton-Smith notes that children's play is used 'as a metaphor for the ephemerality of life',[68] while Hans describes play as a 'back-and-forth movement' through 'a familiar structure that allows one to play with the unfamiliar'.[69] Susanna Millar suggests that play might be best understood as an adverb; 'not as a name for a class of activities, nor as distinguished by the accompanying mood, but to describe how and under what circumstances an action is performed'.[70] In a similar vein, Massumi suggests that play's defining feature is its 'esqueness', understood as the 'performative signature of the mode of abstraction at play'.[71] Other accounts posit that play might be best understood through what it is not.[72] In this vein, Huizinga claims that 'the opposite of play is *earnest*, also used in the more special sense of work',[73] while Nagel argues that 'play finds itself cast in opposition to seriousness',[74] and Sutton-Smith concludes that the opposite of play 'is vacillation, or worse, it is depression'.[75]

Reflecting this conceptual diversity, scholarly theorisations of play employ a variety of approaches, including 'metaphysical, epistemological, ontological, and ethical' perspectives.[76] This is due to what Spariosu calls play's 'ambivalent ontological status'. He explains that by this he means that play is 'both phenomenon and subjectivity or both behaviour and intentionality'.[77] Nagel similarly identifies play's 'precarious ontological status', and notes the difficulties faced by those attempting to theorise play insofar as it 'is an elusive term which defies all conceptualization'.[78] If an epistemological approach is taken, the study of play is no less challenging because play is 'a mixture of reality and irreality, of truth and illusion'.[79] Taking a phenomenological approach, which reflects this paradoxical epistemological status, Fink notes that the 'play world contains both subjective imaginary elements and objective ontic elements'.[80] Others, like Hans, have argued that a dialectical approach is more incisive because the 'relationship between the ontological and the epistemological is at the heart of our considerations of play'. This dialectic, he continues, 'leads to no *aufhebung* … [because] play within the ontological framework – and the epistemological one insofar as it is part of the ontological play – is capable of effecting changes within that network'.[81] In contrast to this, for many scholars associated with the phenomenological and poststructural traditions play defies philosophical and scholarly analyses because of its 'atopian' quality. As Spariosu indicates, for such scholars play 'cannot be approached with critical or analytical tools, implying both a mode of being that remains inaccessible to either rational thought or intuition'.[82]

[65]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 1.
[66]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 2.
[67]Feezell, in Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 11.
[68]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 2.
[69]Hans, *The Play of the World*, pp. 8, 28.
[70]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 3.
[71]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, pp. 9–10.
[72]Hackett, in Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 122.
[73]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 44.
[74]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 1.
[75]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 198.
[76]Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 2.
[77]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 2.
[78]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 1.
[79]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 2.
[80]Fink, in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 27.
[81]Hans, *The Play of the World*, pp. 22–3.
[82]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 3.

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Despite, or in response to, this immanent ambiguity, some useful conceptual analyses have been produced. These analyses variously take a broad or narrow perspective; some scholars 'see pure play as a very narrow and relatively rare phenomenon, while others have identified it "under nearly every rock in the social landscape"'.[83] A particularly useful framing is provided by Sutton-Smith via his seven 'rhetorics of play' – progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and frivolity[84] – upon which many scholars draw. Woodyer, for instance, develops this taxonomy by distinguishing between 'utilitarian' and 'non-instrumental' framings of play. Reflecting Sutton-Smith's 'rhetoric of progress', the former argues that play 'is a process of social and cultural learning, and emotional, cognitive, and physical development'. Conjuring the 'rhetoric of frivolity', the latter positions play 'in opposition to seriousness, morality and productive work, and the social relations these value structures reproduce'. Interestingly, Woodyer notes, these rhetorics are not treated as mutually exclusive but, paradoxically, espoused together.[85] Play is thus simultaneously viewed as efficacious and purposeless. In contrast, in psychosocial framings, as Oriard explains, play can be a night dream, understood as a journey back in time to repressed experiences and their associations, a daydream, exploring what is not yet, or a nightmare, experienced as culture's 'fears about unregenerate human nature, personal irresponsibility, and social chaos'.[86] Two particularly helpful but nevertheless provisional definitions of play are (1) an 'enactive pragmatics of lived abstraction',[87] and (2) 'a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes'.[88]

Having provided a brief overview of some of the core contributions of, and ambiguities in, the existing theoretical literature, this article now deconstructs four key binaries that underpin it. As the below will show, in each case play is conventionally placed at the devalued end of the binary, but its movements playfully resist and subvert these conceptual hierarchies. As such I show that play is (auto)deconstructive, in the sense that exposes the politics and power relations at work at its core by deconstructing itself and thereby demonstrates the utility of deconstructive analyses in international theory.

The play of deconstruction

The deconstructive tradition has played a significant part in the development of postpositivist international theory. Scholars exploring a wide range of empirical and theoretical subject matter have explicitly used a Derridean approach,[89] while others have drawn from his *oeuvre* in explorations of broader theoretical debates.[90] Still others use his thought in texts aimed at

[83]Hopsicker and Carlson, in Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 176.

[84]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*.

[85]Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies', p. 314.

[86]Oriard, *Sporting with the Gods*, p. 358.

[87]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 9.

[88]Suits, cited in Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 46.

[89]Badredine Arfi, *Re-Thinking International Relations Theory via Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 191–207; Michael Dillon, *Deconstructing International Politics* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013); Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss, 'Generalising the international', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005); Madeleine Fagan (ed.), *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Aggie Hirst, 'Derrida and political resistance: the radical potential of deconstruction', *Globalizations*, 12:1 (2015), pp. 6–24; Astrid H. M. Nordin, 'Futures beyond "the West"? Autoimmunity in China's harmonious world', *Review of International Studies*, 42:1 (2016), pp. 156–77; Ronan O'Callaghan, 'Secular theology and noble sacrifice: the ethics of Michael Walzer's just war theory', *Review of International Studies*, 39:2 (2013), pp. 361–83; Patrick Pinkerton, 'Resisting memory: the politics of memorialisation in post-conflict Northern Ireland', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14:1 (2012), pp. 131–52; Lasse Thomassen, 'Deconstruction after Derrida', *Ethics & Global Politics*, 2:4 (2009), pp. 383–8; Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Maja Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[90]Mark Muhannad Ayyash, 'Hamas and the Israeli state: a "violent dialogue"', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:1 (2010), pp. 103–23; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, 'Remnants and revenants: Politics and violence in the

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students,[91] and there has be no shortage of critique of deconstruction and associated approaches.[92] Derrida argues that Western thought relies on a series of oppositional binaries, which operate on a hierarchical basis. He explains: 'in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-á-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand.'[93] Accordingly, it is the task of deconstruction to expose and challenge these power relations. Such a challenge proceeds in two steps: first, it must 'overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition'. In this first move, then, the devalued end of the binary is placed at the valued end, and vice versa. The second step, Derrida continues, subverts the binary more fully by generating new concepts that challenge those at work in it: 'we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the interruptive emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be, and could never be, included in the previous regime'. His strategy of deconstruction is intended, then, 'to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply *residing* within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it'.[94]

The relevance of Derrida's thought to theorising play has been noted by several key commentators. Sutton-Smith, for example, notes that through the play of signifiers, 'Derrida's proposal of deconstruction was one tactic for endlessly finding further interpretations not yet revealed and thus defeating orthodox understandings … [His books] treat their subject with considerable if abstruse playfulness.' Children's play, he continues, 'is a deconstruction of the world in which they live. If the world is a text, the play is the reader's response to that text.[95] Spariosu similarly argues that Derrida's notion of *différance* should be read as 'a play of differences and oppositions which generates and distributes meaning while itself remaining meaningless … Thus *différance* [is] a pure play of simulacra.' Indeed play, he continues, 'permeates Derrida's entire discourse'.[96] John Caputo insightfully notes that

> it is a question of keeping the play in play, of playing along with the play, of avoiding at all costs the repression of the play … [M]etaphysics is the systematic attempt to repress the play, to hold it in check: to create the illusion of abiding truth over and against the flux; to posit

work of Agamben and Derrida', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 13:2 (2011), pp. 127–44; Tom Lundborg, 'The ethics of neorealism: Waltz and the time of international life', *European Journal of International Relations* (2018), p. 135406611876099; Thomas Clément Mercier, 'Resisting legitimacy: Weber, Derrida, and the fallibility of sovereign power', *Global Discourse*, 6:3 (2016), pp. 374–91; Jennifer Milliken, 'The study of discourse in International Relations: a critique of research and methods', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:2 (1999), pp. 225–54.

[91]Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughan-Williams (eds), *Critical Theorists and International Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Jenny Edkins and Maja Zehfuss (eds), *Global Politics: A New Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).

[92]Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1995); K. J. Holsti, 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, which are the fairest theories of all?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:3 (1989), p. 255; Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions and State Power: Essays in International Relations Theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989); John J. Mearsheimer, 'The false promise of international institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (1994), p. 5; Alina Sajed, 'The post always rings twice? The Algerian War, poststructuralism and the postcolonial in IR theory', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012), pp. 141–63. Sajed's critique is especially important as a corrective to unwitting reproductions of colonial logics in some uses of poststructural thought.

[93]Jacques Derrida and Alan Bass, *Positions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 38–9.

[94]Ibid., emphases in original.

[95]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 147, 166.

[96]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 154.

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> metaphysical grounds which cannot be shaken; to establish stable and transparent signs which lead us straight to pure presence.[97]

As this suggests, key to the radical reflexivity of deconstruction is its ceaselessness.

Deconstruction can allow us to glimpse the dynamic, if paradoxical, play of constitutive concepts and thereby problematise the hegemonic discourses and forces on which they rely. Against claims that it is apolitical or removed from the material concerns of global politics, I submit that a deconstructive approach is impactful politically as well as conceptually. As I have argued elsewhere, without overdetermining or annexing them, deconstruction can be compatible with, and complementary to, critical approaches concerned with challenging the symbolic and concrete inequalities of patriarchy, colonialism, heteronormativity, and beyond. Much as when an issue or concept is discussed in a classroom without ultimate resolution, or a text read that challenges one's views without offering an immediate ready solution, the consequence of a deconstructive engagement is not stasis and silence, but rather a sparking of fresh reflections, a rethinking and reimagining that makes possible further generative and productive acts, and a resistance to hegemonic power relations. Operationalised in this way, far from ineffectual, deconstruction is 'the act of taking a position, in the very work it does with regard to the political-institutional structures that constitute and govern our practices, our competences, and our performances'.[98] The remainder of this article develops a theorisation of play that demonstrates that it precipitates an unravelling of any attempt at its conceptualisation, and argues that this illustrates the value of a deconstructive approach to international theory.

Reality/irreality

A first assumption about play is that it is different from real life and reality as normally understood. According to Huizinga, 'play is not "ordinary" or "real" life. It is rather a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.'[99] This claim is echoed by Roger Caillois, who argues that 'play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life'.[100] This separateness from real life is framed in both temporal and spatial terms. In Huizinga's words, play 'proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space',[101] while for Fink 'the play world has no locus or duration at all in the reality-complex of space and time'.[102]

As regards the spatial dimension, Huizinga claims that 'one of the most important characteristics of play [is] its spatial separation from real life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings.'[103] In Massumi's analysis, a designated space is vital for play because territory is among play's necessary conditions. And yet, according to Massumi, such territory is changed by play; it is made different to its real-world equivalent through a process of 'enactive cartography', which 'creates the territory it maps, in new emergent variations'. Play thus occurs in real space made unreal. It 'is an operation of lived abstraction in which territorial functions are at the same time actively invoked and paradoxically placed in suspense, to novel effect'.[104]

In parallel, play occurs in alternate, unreal time. As Brown notes, 'play provides freedom from time. When we are fully engaged in play, we lose a sense of the passage of time.'[105] Such a

[97]John D. Caputo, 'Three transgressions: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida', *Research in Phenomenology*, 15 (1985), p. 74.
[98]Derrida, cited in Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en abyme* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 90.
[99]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 8.
[100]Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*, p. 6.
[101]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 13.
[102]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 24.
[103]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 19.
[104]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, pp. 21–3.
[105]Brown and Vaughan, *Play*, p. 17.

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sentiment is evident in many other analyses of play. Feezell, for instance, notes that '[p]lay time starts and stops, speeds up and slows down, extends limitlessly, or is extinguished', running in ways that are fundamentally different to 'ordinary clock time'.[106] Importantly, this alternate temporality has gratifying effects for those playing. This is because it exists outside of what Fink calls our 'futuristic mode of being', which is focused on life's ultimate goals and plagued by uncertainties about the possibility or nature of happiness. In his words,

> [i]n contrast with the restless dynamism, the obscure ambiguity and relentless futurism of our life, play is characterized by calm, timeless 'presence' and autonomous self-sufficient meaning – play resembles an oasis of happiness that we happen upon … In the autonomy of play action there appears a possibility of human timelessness in time. Time is then experienced, not as a precipitate rush of successive moments, but rather as one full moment that is, so to speak, a glimpse of eternity.[107]

In play's capacity to 'still time's arrow',[108] then, the existential anxieties of being-towards-death are suspended.

And yet, these non-real spatial and temporal dimensions of play are not entirely unreal. In Huizinga's estimation, we play in an unreal world 'without, however, wholly losing consciousness of "ordinary reality"'.[109] Fink argues similarly that the 'play world does not form a curtain or a wall between us and all that is around us. It does not obscure or hide the real world.'[110] In these readings, play is at once qualitatively different from real, ordinary activities and, as noted above, a regular part of everyday lived existence. Woodyer highlights this in her claim that '[p]laying's vital nature also affirms its everyday character.'[111] This is important because the 'everyday is a crucial part of the construction and reification of an "international", and play is a crucial part of the everyday'.[112] As both Woodyer and Massumi note, while not strictly real, play is fundamentally embodied, existing materially rather than solely imaginatively.[113]

Fink provides a compelling reading of this paradoxical real/unreal and embodied/imaginary status. He explains: the 'play world is an imaginary dimension, whose ontological meaning presents an obscure and difficult problem. We play in the so-called real world, but while playing there emerges an enigmatic realm that is not nothing, and yet is nothing real.'[114] Fink posits that this real unreality is based on the unique spacio-temporal relations mentioned above:

> [Play] possesses its own internal space and time. And yet again, while playing we consume real time and real space. But the space of play never merges into the continuum of space that we inhabit in real life. The same is true of time … The world of play is not suspended in a purely ideal world. It always has a real setting, and yet it is never a real thing among other real things, although it has an absolute need of real things as a point of departure.[115]

Play is thus not simply illusion or chimera. It is not ordinary everyday reality, yet it occurs within 'real' space and time, changing these 'real' phenomena through its coming-to-pass within them.

[106]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 25.
[107]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 21.
[108]Brown and Vaughan, *Play*.
[109]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 14.
[110]Fink, in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 24.
[111]Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies', p. 319.
[112]Salter, in Guillaume (ed.), 'The international as an everyday practice', p. 455.
[113]Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies', p. 318; Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 29.
[114]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 23.
[115]Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 24.

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As simultaneously real and not real, then, play taunts us with its inaccessibility.[116] It exists in a zone of indiscernibility;[117] it is 'a real mode of behaviour, which contains, so to speak a mirror image derived from behaviour in the real world … Play is finite creativity in the magic dimension of illusion … [P]lay is the symbolic act of representing the meaning of the world and of life.'[118]

As the above suggests, one of the most interesting aspects of play is its capacity to simultaneously affirm and deny its realness. As a 'dramatistic negative', play can enact an event or gesture that is recognisable as, but qualitatively different from, its real-life equivalent.[119] It does this through performative metacommunication.[120] In his 'A Theory of Play and Mind' (1972), Geoffrey Bateson provides a helpful example, which Massumi discusses at length. When two actors – in Bateson's example, wolf cubs – engage in a play fight, they perform gestures that are similar to, but not the same as, acts of combat. Somehow the participants signal to each other that the acts are play rather than combat, which involves 'the staging of a paradox'. The wolf cub

> 'says', in the manner in which it bites, 'this is not a bite'. The play bite, Bateson says, actively 'stands for' another action, at the same time as it puts the context in which that action finds its practical force in *suspense* … The wolf cub says through his teeth: 'this is not a bite; this is not a fight; this is a game'; I am hereby placing myself on a different register of existence, which nevertheless stands for its suspended analogue.[121]

The play-fight thus comments upon what it is doing as it is doing it, saying 'these actions do not denote what they would denote'. Crucially, however, the player has to provide this commentary to prevent the play becoming a fight. As Massumi notes, 'if it were so simple a case as the actions not denoting what they would denote, they would not have to deny their denoting'. Play thus 'says what it denies, and denies what it says'. The result is an instance of Epimenides paradox, which consists in 'a negative statement containing an implicit negative metastatement'.[122]

As this suggests, play resists a simple designation of real or not real, and in so doing deconstructs the reality/irreality binary, which is often used as a conceptual basis to define it. This might appear frustrating, implying that it sits beyond the realm of sensible scholarly examination. And yet, there are salutary consequences to play's disruption of this binary. Developing a critique of Huizinga and Caillois, Ehrmann observes an 'unacknowledged uneasiness' in their presentation of '"reality", the "real", as a *given* component of the problem, as a referent needing no discussion, as a matter of course, neutral and objective'.[123] This unease is a result of their reliance upon a concrete reality as a yardstick against which to evaluate play. Far from resulting in a satisfactory categorisation, this reliance betrays a suppression of the question of reality itself. As Erhmann argues,

> [i]t is legitimate to wonder by what right 'reality' may be said to be *first*, existing prior to its components – play in this case (although it might just as well be some other object in the social sciences) – and serving as their standard. How could 'reality' serve as a *norm* and thereby guarantee *normality* even before having been tested and evaluated in and through its manifestations? … Play is not played against a background of a fixed, stable, reality which would serve as its standard. All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts

[116]Woodyer, 'Ludic geographies'.
[117]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 6.
[118]Fink, in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 28.
[119]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 1.
[120]Bateman, discussed in Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 139, 195.
[121]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 4.
[122]Ibid., pp. 5–7.
[123]Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 33, emphasis in original.

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> which designate it … [T]he distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played. Play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable.[124]

What is suggested here is that an approach that seeks to evaluate play against an ontologically prior standard of reality is fruitless in its own terms. It cannot finally arbitrate on the question of the reality or unreality of play. Against its intended outcome, it does, however, shine a light on the onto-political underpinning of such an attempt to affix play to, or banish play from, a pre-established category of 'reality'. In other words, play playfully exposes the Cartesian anxiety at work in the rationalist schema, and demands a critical engagement with the nature and composition of reality itself: 'This reality which is considered innocent and behind whose objectivity some scholars sheepishly take shelter, must not be the starting point of any analysis but rather its final outcome.'[125] Play's (auto)deconstruction thus functions to put into question the category of reality as itself playfully constructed. In so doing, it does not simply repeat the tired overture that reality is socially constructed but rather draws attention to the latent power relations at work in specific designations of reality and irreality, offering a jumping-off point for critical analysis.

Seriousness/frivolity

A related but distinct criterion posited, but also challenged, by Huizinga is that play is opposed to seriousness. Huizinga argues that play is paradoxically at once not serious and very serious. To take the first framing first, Huizinga states: 'To our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness … We can say: play is non-serious.'[126] As Echeruo notes, this logic is tacitly deployed by other theorists of play, for whom '"play" is associated with frivolity and paidia; [and] ludus is thought to be necessarily (and by its very nature) unserious'.[127] In Nagel's account, Aristotle initiates a 'malediction' of play in Western philosophy by privileging seriousness over play: 'And we say that serious things [*spoudaia*] are better than laughable things and those connected with amusement [*paidia*].'[128] In this logic, play is usually defined, as Fink notes, 'in contrast with serious and responsible activities … Play is thought of more or less as frivolous and pleasurable nonsense.'[129]

Such a view is challenged, however, by a number of commentators in two important ways. A first objection leaves the binary relation of seriousness vs frivolity intact, but argues for the importance of the latter as a counterweight to the oppressive character of the former. Exploring a hitherto largely overlooked analysis of play in *Being and Nothingness*, Rebecca Pitt argues that Sartre's account should be read 'as a critique of, rather than a statement about, our existence. Furthermore, play tentatively indicates the parameters for Sartre's developing emancipatory theory.'[130] This is because play has the capacity to expose and distance us from the possessive mode of being he calls the '*project-of-trying-to-be-God*', which is characterised by the desire for objectivity, being, and totality. Play can do this because it 'releases subjectivity', and introduces '"the least possessive attitude" one can adopt towards human reality'. Citing Sartre, Pitt concludes: '*Play* is the counter-example to those who "make the Not a part of their very subjectivity, establish their human personality as a perpetual negation", or, in other words, objectify themselves.'[131]

According to this Sartrean reading, then, play 'is the antithesis of the dominant and pervasive way in which we understand our existence through *bad faith* and *seriousness*'.[132] This potent

[124]Ibid., pp. 33, 56.
[125]Ibid., p. 34.
[126]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 5.
[127]In Bogue and Sparisou (eds), *The Play of the Self*, p. 145.
[128]Cited in Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 1.
[129]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 19.
[130]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play* (eds), p. 109.
[131]In ibid., pp. 114–16.
[132]In ibid., p. 117.

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unseriousness allows us to break through the barriers to freedom and self-authorship erected by dominant modes of being. As Sutton-Smith shows, players can utilise the very unseriousness of play for the most serious of ends. Like the Dionysian trickster, the self-authoring player 'is so frivolous he [*sic*] can invert frivolity'. The implication of this is that far from trivial or insignificant, 'frivolity is potentially the most sacred play of all, … [making] players feel that they can transcend reality and indeed morality'.[133] Framed in this way, play becomes the salutary binary opposite to seriousness. The dichotomy in this case is inverted, placing frivolous play at the privileged side, in contrast to its conventional devalued position.

A second challenge argues that the dichotomous framing of seriousness/frivolity should be disrupted because play is a serious matter. Rather than inverting the binary, in this case it is subverted. Huizinga acknowledges that the seriousness/frivolity binary is problematic: 'Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed … Some play can be very serious indeed.'[134] He elaborates:

> [The] 'only pretending' quality of play betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with 'seriousness', a feeling that seems to be as primary as play itself. Nevertheless, as we have already pointed out, the consciousness of play being 'only pretend' does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness … The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid. The inferiority of play is constantly being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness.[135]

In this reading, then, the frivolity implied by play's ir/reality is counteracted by the seriousness with which it is taken by players. Somehow, despite its ultimate groundlessness, play is brought into the realm of the serious through players' commitment to, and investment in, it. As Feezell explains, playful activities 'aren't "serious", but, of course, they can be wholly absorbing and engaged in quite seriously. I have called such an attitude "serious nonseriousness".'[136] Such seriousness of player engagement troubles the serious/frivolity binary, showing that despite its ambiguous ontological and epistemological status, play is a serious business in important ways. As Emily Ryall notes, 'it is not so straightforward to say that one must be involved in a non-serious autotelic activity to be playing; for … many instances of play, namely game-playing, are taken very seriously'.[137]

This seriousness is due in part to the central role play, according to Huizinga, in producing civilisation and culture. He takes the view that 'culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning'.[138] It furthermore derives from a view of play as, in John Wall's words, 'the expression of humanity's basic goodness and wisdom, its natural or sacred spontaneity and simplicity … [and] human authenticity'.[139] In these framings, play's seriousness derives from its productive or generative capacities. For Huizinga and others, play reflects and perpetuates crucial sociopolitical and cultural forces, at once affirming and improving elements of the human condition. This seriousness has also to do with players' affective experiences in play. So serious can play become, Massumi notes, that it 'provokes the same terror' as its analogue counterpart. It can, he explains, be 'deadly serious'. This is because while the ontological status of play is different to its 'real-world' equivalent, the two generate the same affective response in players: 'there is one factor that is not touched by the suspension effected by the play-gesture's placing the ensuing

[133]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 211–13.
[134]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 5.
[135]Ibid., p. 8.
[136]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 20.
[137]Ibid., p. 45.
[138]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 46.
[139]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p 35.

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activity in the conditional mode. That factor is *affect* … The scaryesque inspires fright.'[140] For these reasons, Barry Dixon argues, an 'important start to any examination of play is how serious a thing it is'.[141]

And yet, while these imperatives to take play seriously are well taken, according to Ducharme and Fine, play requires a form of engagement other than seriousness as a necessary condition. Too serious an approach in a play environment, they suggest, can undermine it: 'Participants must modulate their level of engrossment so as not to be either over- or under-involved in the situation … If play is taken too seriously, it ceases to be playful; similarly, if a game is not taken seriously enough, it falls apart.'[142] To return to Bateson's example, if one wolf cub bites the other too seriously, the metacommunicative act through which the bite connotes nip is lost. The result is that the bite becomes a bite proper, at which point the playful encounter loses its qualitative difference from its real-world equivalent. Play must, then, be taken seriously through the disruption of the seriousness/frivolity binary, and at the same time not so seriously that it loses its playfulness altogether.

A related issue arises when we consider the politics at work in the seriousness/frivolity binary. At its core, as Sutton-Smith points out, lies a series of hierarchical power relations. He explains:

> play is declared frivolous not only because of neglect or because frivolous play is the abstract opposite of some higher-level form of ludic activity. The label 'frivolity' is, rather, an abuse of some kinds of play on behalf of other kinds of play, because that is what is politically suitable for some dominating groups … [It may thus be read] as an implicit form of political or scholarly denigration.[143]

Here, Sutton-Smith begins a discussion of the ways in which the play of 'less powerful groups is implicitly excluded and even ridiculed'. The historically dominant forms of play and games of 'kings, princes, politicians, colonizing administrators, aristocracies, ethnic groups, heterosexuals, and men', he argues, have been inscribed with a seriousness through association with heroism, military prowess, competitiveness, and organised festivals and contests. The play of marginalised groups, including women, racial and sexual minorities, the poor, and those with less power and wealth, has, in parallel, been denigrated. The former groups have, of course, historically excluded the latter from participating in valorised forms of play. And yet this devaluation of marginalised play has only been partially successful because it has not, at least not entirely, undermined participants' seriousness about their play. As Sutton-Smith concludes, 'these denigrated groups are generally deadly serious and righteous about their own play as are those who denigrate them. They are not frivolous in their own eyes, they are seriously at play.'[144] Thus, as Kostas Axelos argues, 'play should not be set in opposition to serious and profitable activities'.[145] This is because, as Fink notes, as long as 'we continue naively using popular antitheses of "work-play", "frivolity-seriousness" and the like, we will never grasp the ontological meaning of play'.[146] We might add to this that these antitheses obscure important hierarchical power relations associated with the denigration of marginalised play, which only come to light as we deconstruct them.

Paradoxically, then, understanding play requires both that we undermine the seriousness/frivolity dichotomy, and that it remains intact to the extent that play can serve as an antidote to the excessive constraints of life's seriousness and such that play can occur at all. As such, it (auto) deconstructs. The irreality of play can connote both unseriousness and form the basis of immensely serious affective and productive activities, from civilisation to subjectification. This

[140]Citing Bateson, Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, pp. 24–5.
[141]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 64.
[142]In Bogue and Sparisou (eds), *The Play of the Self*, p. 97.
[143]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, pp. 207–08.
[144]Ibid., p. 208.
[145]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 6.
[146]In ibid., p. 19.

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has the consequences of exposing the politics of play in the attribution of frivolity by privileged groups to the play of marginalised groups. The latters' engagement in practices of resistance are visible in their self-perception as seriously at serious play. As Sutton-Smith notes, his seven rhetorics 'can be examined as a representation of the way people value some kind of play, and also as a representation of the way these same people use play to maintain their control by denigrating other kinds of play'.[147] As Nagel similarly shows, our theories of play must interrogate the politics, ideology, and exclusions of existing discourses. Play, she notes, is no longer innocent.[148] Huizinga demonstrates an awareness of these disciplinary power relations in his observation that 'seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness'.[149]

Productive/pointless

According to Huizinga, a third criterion is that play 'is superfluous. The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes a need … [I]t is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during "free time".'[150] Caillois espouses a similar sentiment: 'A characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art.'[151] Hackett offers a related evaluation, arguing we should recognise that, 'as Oscar Wilde and W. H. Auden have noted, play is in fact useless, that it makes nothing happen'.[152]As this suggests, play is frequently framed as a leisure activity and an end in itself; as Nagel notes, '[l]eisurely play occurs for its own sake or for relaxation.'[153] Such leisurely activity is assumed to be undertaken without a substantive goal or purpose. In Ackerman's analysis, Jeremy Bentham concluded that play is pointless from a utilitarian perspective,[154] while Hackett concludes: 'Whether it is Mozart or marbles, Shakespeare or soccer, all play forms are equally impractical to the immediate needs of life … At times, I have rather casually defined play as everything we do for no good reason.'[155] Play is thus frequently viewed as without external goal, unproductive, and pointless.

As was the case with the seriousness/frivolity dichotomy, there have been challenges both to this binary's conventional hierarchy and the binary itself. In the first case, it has been argued that while play is indeed opposed to work and productivity, it is valuable for precisely these reasons. In this logic, while play is indeed the opposite of work, it comes to occupy the privileged end of the binary. This is because, in Ehrmann's words, 'it is the gratuitousness, the very uselessness of play, which makes it "pure"'.[156] In his study of play and games in US culture, Oriard emphasises the degree to which play, in contrast to games, rejects the valorisation of work. He explains:

> [P]lay has its own history as well in the cultural rhetoric I am examining, not as an element in the 'game' but as a rejection of it. To put the case simply: If work has defined official cultural values since the 19th century, play has defined the spirit of the perennial counterculture. The celebrations of the 'game' … have idealized work in various ways; the rhetoric of 'play' has rejected the cultural pre-eminence of work to envisage utopia.[157]

Play can thus be read as a challenge to prevailing idealisations of work and the work ethic. This is evident in the frequent association of play with pleasure, relaxation, escape, and retreat. As Fink

[147]Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 204.
[148]Nagel, in Margaret Carlisle Duncan, Garry Edward Chick, and D. Alan Aycock (eds), *Diversions and Divergences in Fields of Play*, Play & Culture Studies 1 (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1998), p. 27.
[149]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 45.
[150]Ibid., p. 8.
[151]Caillois and Barash, *Man, Play, and Games*, p. 5.
[152]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 123.
[153]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 2.
[154]Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 18.
[155]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 123.
[156]Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 39.
[157]Oriard, *Sporting with the Gods*, p. 356.

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notes, play 'is usually defined as "recreation" or "relaxation" … in contrast with serious and responsible activities'.[158]

Hans explores some possible reasons for this separation, identifying Marx's analysis of people's alienation from labour and the ways in which the fruits of work – money and reserve time – can be used playfully outside of work itself. He suggests: 'Play and work become two opposing categories with a mediated cause-and-effect relationship: one cannot play while he [*sic*] works, but he can play *after* work with the money he earned *during* work. This is one of the most conspicuous messages delivered by today's advertising media.'[159] A key dimension of this separation is the question of motivation and reward. For Bernard Suits, among others, for an activity to be play it must be autotelic, meaning it must be an end in itself, driven by internal rather than external motivations. Elaborating on this, Feezell explains:

> [T]he key to play is autotelicity, engaging in activities for their own sake or as ends in themselves. This involves the question of the de facto motives, reasons or purposes involved when the activities are undertaken … Play requires intrinsic reasons, and if our reason (exclusive? predominant?) for doing whatever we choose to do is intrinsic to the activity, it is play. Consequently, if games or sports are pursued voluntarily and for intrinsic reasons, they are play forms; if they are pursued involuntarily or engaged in predominantly for extrinsic reasons, they are not play forms.[160]

Opinion varies about whether autotelicity is a necessary or sufficient condition for play: while Suits argues for the former, others such as Klaus Meier propose the latter.[161] The significance of autotelicity for Suits is shown in its central role in his overall definition of play. As Ryall notes, he argues that play 'is a reallocation of resources from instrumental to intrinsic use; for instance, the use of a chair as a spaceship, or the use of a sweatshirt as a goal post'.[162] Play is thus opposed to work as it is aimed not at the production of some instrumental end but rather functions as an end in itself.

In the second case, the productive/pointless binary more fundamentally self-deconstructs. Such a disruption is evidenced by Hans in his exploration of the ways in which work and play interrelate and overlap. People committed to the work ethic, he argues, are frequently simultaneously committed to the idea that their work is a form of play. This is reflected in the propensity to view forms of work that encompass an element of play as more desirable than those that do not. In Hans's words, the fact is that 'people still play on the job no matter how alienated they are from their labour; even though the work itself may not be essentially playful, people work at making it playful and find ways of doing so'.[163] While for Hans, this blurring of the boundaries has positive connotations – making work playful – for others, this has problematic consequences. As noted above, McKenzie Wark, for example, argues that in the current digital age work becomes play.[164] Whether for good or ill, then, work and play bleed into each other. In this framing, as this suggests, there is a problem framing play as work's opposite.

The issue of autotelicity further undermines the productive/pointless binary. In insisting that play is intrinsically driven, the issue of motivation is raised. Play is frequently described as being animated by a spontaneous energy, separate from the resources demanded and expended in work. In Massumi's account, play is characterised by 'a surplus: an excess of energy or spirit. This excess

[158]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 19.
[159]Hans, *The Play of the World,* p. 25, emphases in original.
[160]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 17.
[161]In ibid., pp. 17, 45.
[162]In ibid., p. 45.
[163]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. 26.
[164]Wark, *Gamer Theory.*

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is felt as a palpable enthusiasm carrying a force of induction, a contagious involvement.'[165] Hackett suggests something similar in his framing of play 'as a mere waste product of life, a discharge of excess energy, sometimes linked to masturbation'.[166] Such an energy is associated with a cathartic 'letting off steam', a '*line of flight* away from a life we find overbearing, absurd or intolerable'.[167] In Homan's words, which conjure a comparable experience, play 'does not expressly fulfil a function, but instead arises from the superabundance that is beyond strict utility'.[168]

As this suggests, while play defined in these terms may not result in material production of the kind associated with work, it is no less productive for that. As Hackett relays, '[t]ranscending utilitarian considerations and inviting hardship, play brings about the existential satisfaction of restoring us to ourselves'.[169] Play, in this reading, is far from pointless inasmuch as it has both immanent purpose and autonomous meaning. As Fink explains,

> [i]t is frequently said that play is 'purposeless' or 'undirected' activity. This is not the case. Considered as a whole it is purposive and each individual phase of play action has its own specific purpose, which is an integral part of the whole. The immanent purpose of play is not subordinate to the ultimate purpose served by all other human activity. Play has only internal purpose, unrelated to anything external to itself.[170]

Far from being pointless, this ludic excess, he continues, is supremely valuable, albeit in terms other than prevailing notions of productivity. As Homan similarly argues, 'to speak of play as non-purposive is not to say that it lacks any purpose, rather the activity is its own purpose'.[171]

Thus, play both inverts and subverts the productive/pointless binary. In the former case, play is elevated to a privileged position to the degree it draws out the problematic qualities of the work to which it is conceptually opposed. In the latter challenge, the binary is subverted because work can involve or demand play, and because play has an immanent purpose that makes it productive, albeit in terms different from prevailing understandings of what counts as purposeful, framed in commodified, instrumental terms. Play thus permeates and disrupts the productive/pointless binary, exposing the power relations and politics at work in the devaluation of activities not directly related to the interests of production and consumption. Its value, as noted above, is to be found in the affective register:

> Although nonnormative, ethico-aesthetic politics is not without criteria of evaluation … Given the noncognitive nature of ethico-aesthetic activity, the evaluation necessarily pertains to affect … The main criterion available … is the degree to which the political gesture carries through enthusiasm of the body. Intensity is the supreme value of this manner of politics, for the simple reason that it is experienced as a value in itself … Enthusiasm of the body is lived in and for itself, [constituting] an immediate surplus value of life.[172]

Massumi demonstrates here the generative qualities of play, which both challenges and subverts the association of play with pointlessness. He concludes: 'What is played is invention. The aesthetic yield of play comes with an active mobilization of improvisational powers of variation.

[165]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 161.
[166]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 122.
[167]Webster, in ibid., pp. 186–7, emphasis in original.
[168]In ibid., p. 100.
[169]In ibid., p. 124.
[170]In Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 21.
[171]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 100.
[172]Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, p. 42.

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Surplus-value of life equals surplus-value of inventiveness.'[173] This productive capacity of play is echoed by Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*: 'I know of no other way of coping with great tasks, than play.'[174] In its (auto)deconstructive movements, then, play challenges the supposed dominance of the serious, exposing and undermining its oppositional hierarchy.

Reason/unreason

To turn to the final conceptual binary to be discussed in this article, play is frequently framed as the opposite of reason. As was the case with the serious/frivolous binary, Huizinga has an ambiguous position on this question. On the one hand, he states:

> Since the reality of play extends beyond the sphere of human life it cannot have its foundations in any rational nexus, because this would limit it to mankind … The very existence of play continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation. Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanical things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.[175]

Here, Huizinga suggests that play cannot be based in reason because animals play, a notion echoed by Massumi, Caillois, and others. Ducharme and Fine frame play's irrationality in terms of the peculiar mode of engagement it incites; citing Goffman, they posit that 'the individual becomes an integral part of the situation, lodged in it and exposed to it, infusing himself [*sic*] into the encounter in a way quite different from the way an ideally rational player commits his side to an ideally rational game'.[176] In creating this alternate non-rational experiential mode, in this framing play functions to suspend or defer reason. It precipitates a different form of be(com)ing, suspending the imperative to 'strive arduously for knowledge, for excellence and virtue, for fame and honor, for power and prosperity'.[177]

Yet, on the other hand, Huizinga's apparent embrace of the irrationality of play is tempered by the degree to which his analysis relies upon, and perpetuates, a series of rationalist ontological, epistemological, and normative commitments. Nagel identifies the origins of this rationalist approach in Aristotle's treatment of play, framed as 'Apollonian', which seeks to discipline and jettison the irrational dimensions of play. She introduces her insightful book with the statement: 'I will explore Aristotle's strategy to eclipse the Dionysian impulse: Play (paidia) becomes the Other (of reason) … [His] malediction of play serves as a thread, a guideline for explicating the Apollonian tenor in modern play theory.'[178] Such a rationalist view is characterised by a desire to restrain the more destabilising elements of play by emphasising its capacity to generate order and affirm dominant cultural tropes. As Huizinga notes: 'Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection. Play demands order, absolute and supreme.'[179] He continues:

> In order that the play-element of civilization be productive of culture or favourable to it, this element must be pure. It must not consist in deviation from or in the repudiation of the prescribed by reason, humanity or faith … Its spirit and its climate are those of joyous exultation, not of wild hysteria.[180]

[173]Ibid., p. 12.
[174]Cited by Fink, in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 25.
[175]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 3–4.
[176]In Bogue and Sparisou (eds), *The Play of the Self*, p. 96.
[177]Fink, in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 19.
[178]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 4.
[179]Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 10.
[180]Cited in Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature*, p. 54.

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It is thus necessary for Huizinga, Ehrmann argues, that play is put to work in the service of preserving and promoting the existing political and cultural order. The analysis proceeds with the assumption of given and fixed context: Huizinga's (and Caillois's) 'formulation of the problem of play makes no allowance for the problem of understanding culture. Culture, *their* idea of culture, is at no time called into question by play. On the contrary, it is *given*: a fixed, stable, pre-existent element, serving as a frame of reference in the evaluation of play.'[181] As this suggests, this rationalist worldview also posits an a priori player, who is the subject of play. As Flint notes, Huizinga 'sought to gain mastery and control of understandings of play as the grounds for the cultivation of cultures, [and] he did so tacitly by means of the classical metaphysical principle of being'.[182]

These rationalist tendencies, and the accompanying malediction of play, have their roots in broader trends in Western philosophy and culture. Relaying key elements of Gadamer's account of this process, Hans identifies the 'shifting traditions of verification in Western culture' in the eighteenth century: 'the shift away from verification through common sense, authority, and prejudgements to verification through some variety of the scientific method'. He continues:

> Of course, the scientific method itself does not really eliminate verification by common sense, authority, and prejudgement, but it does force these factors underground … Now it is the scientific method itself – and not the experience of an individual – that determines the truth value of a statement. The result of this shift in the method of verification is obvious: those activities and disciplines not amenable to verification through reason and the scientific methods lose their status as having truth value … The arts have been relegated to this status, according to Gadamer, for exactly the same reasons play becomes peripheral.[183]

Hans's claim here is that the rise of reason as a core element of the scientific method is linked to the devaluation of forms of knowledge resistant to empirical testing and falsification. The ensuing claim that methodological processes are the only legitimate path to knowledge initiates the banishment of play as incommensurable with, and, as I will discuss in the conclusion, a danger to, reason. Importantly, the malediction of play though its association with unreason corresponds to a series of broader power relations: it is linked to the reification of a particular form of philosophy reserved for specific privileged groups and the devaluation of practices associated with subjugated social groups. Reflecting this point, Nagel identifies the gendered, racialised, and elitist consequences of play's relegation to the sphere of unreason in Aristotle's thought: 'philosophy is not a game, not a trivial matter, which can be pursued by women or children or nonpropertied men (that is, the masses or subaltern subjects)'.[184]

Play thus becomes, in Nagel's terms, 'ideologically suspect'. She explains: 'Agitating in this process of abjection, we encounter "serious" thinkers who denounce play as an unworthy, childish, irrational, superficial activity'.[185] Such thinkers come to revile play to the degree that it 'has come to be the Other of reason'.[186] In her reading, which draws up and develops Spariosu's influential study, Western philosophy since Socrates has served to discipline and devalue play. In Spariosu's words, '[p]hilosophy sets itself the task of subduing poetry, of imposing upon it a spiritual world of order, clarity, and permanence, a world of rationality and morality – the world of Being in the Platonic sense.'[187] Originating in the pre-Socratic struggle between what he calls 'archiac' and 'median' forces – the former corresponding broadly to Dionysian irrationality and the latter

[181]Ibid., p. 55.
[182]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 155.
[183]Hans, *The Play of the World*, pp. 3–4.
[184]Nagel, *Masking the Abject*, p. 1.
[185]Ibid.
[186]Ibid., p. 3.
[187]Spariosu, *Dionysus Reborn*, p. 162.

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Apollonian reason – Spariosu argues that Western philosophy continues to be characterised by this agonism:

> Although Plato and Aristotle convert heroic and tragic poetry into 'fiction' or 'literature', subordinating it to the serious and moral truth of metaphysics, the ancient agon between the poets and philosophers comes back again and again to haunt Western thought … Faced with this challenge or threat, the modern philosophers may react in two ways: they either reenact the Platonic suppression of prerational values, relegating them again to the realm of 'mere' art and play (in the case of Kant); or they wholeheartedly embrace these values, turning literature or art into an effective weapon against their own philosophical opponents (the case of the artist-metaphysicians) [Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida].[188]

This statement is important as it indicates the extent to which challenges posed by Nietzsche and his inheritors may be read as marking the return of the Dionysian play feared, and consequently banished, by the Apollonian tenor of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and much of modern Western philosophy. Such a return indicates that this attempted banishment has been ultimately unsuccessful; Nietzsche has been described as 'the first dancing philosopher', while Derrida holds claim to be 'perhaps the most playful' of figures explored in Spariosu's category of philosophical artist-metaphysicians.[189] Play's (auto)deconstructive tendency thus challenges the supremacy of reason, exposing the politics and power relations at work in the devaluation of knowledge and being which cannot be apprehended in rational terms.

Conclusion

This article has argued that play is at work in international theory. Utilising Derrida's thought, I have shown that play deconstructs itself in the process of attempted conceptualisation, and that the radical reflexivity of this (auto)deconstructive capacity has significant value for challenging hegemonic concepts and forces in global politics. To substantiate this claim, by deconstructing core elements of Huizinga's foundational text, the article has shown that play resists stable conceptualisation in binary terms, frustrating attempts to offer a useful working definition. However, my claim is that its theoretical and political potential inheres in precisely this resistance. By refusing to obediently come to rest in one or another conceptual pole, play allows us to glimpse a relational movement that highlights the politics at stake in the Western philosophy's malediction of play. It is as though the devalued end of each binary playfully speaks back to the politics inscribing the devaluation, pushing towards both the privileged side and/or its broader subversion.

Importantly, as noted above, the play of deconstruction has provoked considerable unease in the Western philosophical tradition. As Hans notes,

> [o]ur own tradition has the need to legitimize a ground or origin for play, something that would remove the anxiety inherent in an activity to which we must wholly give ourselves. The need for security and for play regularly come into conflict, with the result that we have tried to ground play and make it safe. But this desire to ground play is borne of an attitude that has always characterized play as a peripheral activity.[190]

I would argue that such an anxiety, Cartesian in nature, is at work in the Apollonian devaluation of play this article has set out. Furthermore, I would suggest that play, of both signifiers and concepts more generally, is a key means by which the power relations associated with this anxiety

[188]Ibid.
[189]Ibid., pp. 154–5.
[190]Hans, *The Play of the World*, p. 15.

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may be exposed and challenged. As Hackett argues, play, 'which at first glance seems so wasteful and insignificant, turns out to the realm of life best suited to objectifying and confronting our existential apprehensions, for the freedom and courage necessary to play is also the freedom and courage necessary to being'.[191]

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[191]In Ryall, Russell, and Maclean (eds), *The Philosophy of Play*, p. 121.

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