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The State of Play: The Grasshopper's Game Replayed

In Aesop's fable, the industrious ant works hard to stockpile food for the forthcoming winter whereas the improvident grasshopper spends all summer singing and so dies for lack of food when winter comes. Philosopher Bernard Suits appears to turn this cautionary tale on its head in his seminal work 'The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia' (originally published in 1978 and reissued in 2005). His Grasshopper playfully engages disciples Skepticus and Prudence in a Socratic dialogue to address a number of riddles. One of these takes up most of the inner section of the book and is a riposte to Wittgenstein's (1958) assertion that the concept of games cannot be defined. But that's not all the book is about. Not only does it propose and defend a definition of games that can meet analytical philosophy's requirement of necessary and sufficient conditions, it also considers the value of playing games – indeed, it seems to suggest that game-playing is the ultimate human good, the only thing that makes life worth living. Yet this presents a paradox. If, in Utopia, there is no need to work because everything is provided, then all that remains is playing games. However, this eventually becomes unsatisfactory so people begin to do unnecessary things that previously had instrumental value but are now carried out for their own sake (like building houses or solving scientific problems). This is the final riddle, according to Kolers (2014): perhaps it is not that the good life consists in playing games, but that it is the life that is itself a game. These riddles and paradoxes turn on the question of value.

In this piece, and with deep and sincere apologies to Suits, I appropriate his play frame and rearrange it in a way to suit the issue at hand: the state of play. Here, the interlocutors are descendants of the originals: KATYDID (a particularly noisy bush cricket) and two disciples: PRAGMATICUS (a play campaigner and practical realist) and LUTROTES (a leading light in the Save Children's Play campaign). Glossing over the issue of defining play (for reasons that

emerge), it explores the contradictions inherent in discussing play's value and ends with a riddle that readers may or may not wish to attempt to solve.

PRAGMATICUS: So, Katydid, what do you think about the state of play at the moment?

KATYDID: That rather depends.

PRAGMATICUS: On what?

KATYDID: On whether you're asking about play generally in these late modern times of uncertainty and neoliberalism, or the state of children's play specifically, or the relationship between the State and play, or any other manner of addressing the question.

LUTROTES: Doesn't it all come down to the same thing in the end?

KATYDID: What might that be?

LUTROTES: That many societies no longer value play.

KATYDID: Well, if you look at the turnover of the global toy and games industry or the leisure and entertainments industry, or even at the gamification of management theories, you might say we in the minority world¹ value play a lot. And, as the great play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (1999) pointed out, the income and status of those who are professional players (sports and entertainment celebrities) are considerably greater than the income and status of those whose work might be considered more serious.

LUTROTES: So, are you saying that all is rosy in the ludic garden?

KATYDID: Not necessarily. These examples represent a very particular understanding of value where play is valued because of the money that can be made from it. It becomes a commodity to be bought and sold. Turned into a thing to be predefined, packaged and marketed, it becomes a parody of play, or, as the Situationists (Debord, 1994) would have said, a spectacle of the real thing (whatever that might be).

¹ The term 'minority world' is used here to refer to what are sometime called 'western' or 'developed' countries; it reflects the fact that the majority of people live in economically poorer countries.

PRAGMATICUS: So what might that be? What is the 'real thing'? What is play?

KATYDID: Aha. Yes, you might think it is difficult to discuss the state of play without first defining what play is. After all, the Grasshopper spent the whole summer discussing with Skepticus the definition of games. This is where the play scholars come in. And for them, as many of them recognise (Burghardt, 2005; Henricks, 2006; Sutton-Smith, 1999), how play is defined depends on the perspective of the scholar. Some say it can't be defined because it represents a paradox, or because it is a meta-concept encompassing too many different forms and expressions. Some say we can't even agree on what kind of phenomenon it is. Is it an activity or a behaviour? An attitude or a disposition? Do we talk about it in terms of its forms and structure? Is it something that exists outside of us and plays us? (Feezell, 2010).

LUTROTES: Goodness. If there is that much confusion, no wonder play's in a bit of a state.

KATYDID: Well, Burghardt (2005) for one might well agree with you. But perhaps it's only in a bit of a state for those who study it from the kind of perspective that would be worried about the state it's in, if that makes sense.

LUTROTES: Come again?

KATYDID: Well, take for example research into children's play. Because adults have a particular relationship with children, and because much research into children's play is closely linked to the practice of professionals working with children, it becomes mixed up with our own emotional investment in childhood. This is especially true of some branches of psychology and education. The value they attach both to childhood and to children's play becomes instrumental. In order for it to be taken seriously, it has to be shown to be useful for something. And for children, that something tends to be growing up into fully functioning citizens. This is what Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) calls the progress rhetoric. The purpose of childhood is to grow into an adult; and within this the purpose of play is to help that process.

Play is defined and categorised so that it can be managed in some way towards desired outcomes.

LUTROTES: But surely children do learn things when they play?

KATYDID: Of course they do. But they also learn things from any other experience too. So do adults. So learning specific things needed in adult life might not be what is special about playing. This is when it becomes useful to look at what other disciplines have had to say: those who study animal play, or adult play, or even those who study children's folklore, researchers who not so heavily invested in what we as adults need to *do* about children's play. Such disciplines can reveal interesting things that would not otherwise be considered.

PRAGMATICUS: Like what?

KATYDID: Like the idea that the benefits that come from juvenile playfulness might be immediate rather than deferred until adulthood (Burghardt, 2005), or that perhaps it is not specific skills that are learned but more an openness to an uncertain world (Spinka et al., 2001). Like seeing the intrinsic as well as instrumental value of playing: pleasure and enjoyment, friendships, place attachment and so on. Ironically these might also be instrumental benefits, so you see how hard it is to separate the two. Like valuing play's irrationality, frivolity, unpredictability and nonsense. Like the idea that play is not necessarily an activity that only takes place at designated times and in designated spaces, but is interwoven into everyday life, a disposition rather than an activity (Lester and Russell, 2010) (this echoes the Grasshopper's fundamental element of playing games – a 'lusory' or playful attitude). Like the idea that play is not inherently A Good Thing: some scholars show that it can be cruel, destructive, obsessive even (Burghardt, 2005; Caillois, 2001; Henricks, 2006). This is why some adults who see play mainly as a mechanism for learning specific skills feel the need to guide children's play in order to make sure they learn the right things,

which then, paradoxically, turns it into something other than play. From this perspective, only some forms of playing are valued and others are discouraged.

LUTROTOS: Now I'm really confused. Are you saying they're wrong?

KATYDID: Not necessarily. I am saying it's just one way to theorise and research play and to talk about its value. Our own daily experiences and stories show that it's not so easy to fix play into categories and definitions. These are necessary but we also need to appreciate the fuzziness of the borders between what is and is not play.

LUTROTOS: But isn't it true that children in minority world countries play out much less?

KATYDID: Perhaps, in some ways. There are things about contemporary childhoods in minority world countries (and increasingly majority world countries too, as the world becomes more urbanised) that make it difficult for children to find time and space to play: traffic; dangerous, degraded or toxic environments; global, market-driven changes to local labour conditions; conflict and forced migration; 'natural' disasters; contested public space; over-protection and fear; over-programming (Lester and Russell, 2010). But these issues play out differently across different social groups and places. There's plenty of research that shows how some children do still play outside regularly (for example, in the UK: Brockman et al., 2011; Mikkelsen and Christensen, 2009; Page et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2013). But the street has always been a contested space for children's play.

PRAGMATICUS: In what way?

KATYDID: Well, if you look at some histories of play provision in countries like the UK and the USA (Cranwell, 2003; Hart, 2002), its key purpose was to keep poor kids off the street and on the straight and narrow. The streets were seen as places of danger, where children would either be corrupted by the loose morals of others or would cause trouble themselves. Today, the streets are seen both as places of danger from traffic, strangers and bullies and as places where children have a right to play. It is rather contradictory.

LUTROTES: But now aren't people getting worried that children are not playing out enough, that they're spending too much time sitting in front of screens? That they don't do enough physical activity? That they're less connected to nature and the environment? That they are unhappy and there is a rise in things like Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder and autism? And that lack of time, space and permission to play is part of the problem?

KATYDID: Yes, there is a lot of concern about this, and there are grounds for concern. But these concerns again highlight the paradoxes in the way adults value children's play. There is another way to look at these concerns.

PRAGMATICUS: I have a feeling you're going to tell us what that is.

KATYDID: Well, our time's nearly up, but I can try briefly if you're interested.

PRAGMATICUS: Go on, then.

KATYDID: There's something about focusing on the problems that means we develop a rather skewed perspective on children. There are trends we need to be aware of and to respond to, but sometimes the way they are discussed in the media, in campaign literature and even in academic research is rather emotive and alarmist, because that is the way to grab attention and win hearts and minds over to a cause. But this way of framing the issue also means we end up thinking that all children's lives are toxic (Palmer, 2006), that childhood itself is under threat, and with it the future of all humanity. And adults then set themselves up as the saviours of what they deem to be a good childhood. Children's own strengths, their contributions to social life, their capacity to sort some things out themselves, their competence at being children – these things are overlooked and they become passive victims to be rescued.

PRAGMATICUS: But if it's successful in bringing people's attention to the problems, doesn't that justify its use?

KATYDID: Ends justifying means? Possibly. But what other damage is done in the meantime in terms of medicalising childhood or turning children into helpless victims?

PRAGMATICUS: I see your point, but doesn't it help if it means that governments recognise the importance of play?

KATYDID: Ah, now we're on to another way of thinking about the state of play – the relationship between the State and children's play. This adds a whole other layer to the debate.

LUTROTES: It's important, isn't it? After all, article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that governments need to respect and promote children's right to play. And General Comment No 17 (UNCRC, 2013) talks about barriers to play and what governments should do about them.

KATYDID: It is important, you're right. In fact, it might be too important to take seriously.

PRAGMATICUS: Now you're talking in riddles again.

KATYDID: Most scholars' definitions of play include reference to its autotelicity, it is an end in itself rather than a means to other ends. In other words, its value is intrinsic. Yet it also has instrumental value. Perhaps that instrumental value derives from the very autotelicity that might be at risk if children are encouraged to play in particular ways, or discouraged from playing in other ways, according to the instrumental value attached to forms of playing by adults.

PRAGMATICUS: So adults should stop interfering?

KATYDID: All adults? Does that include play campaigners?

LUTROTES: I'm beginning to feel a little uncomfortable.

KATYDID: Understandably. So, maybe the paradox needs to be embraced rather than solved. Play has both intrinsic and instrumental value and the two cannot be clearly separated, the boundaries are fuzzy. Play is both an activity and a disposition: we can play at work and work

at play. It is a particular culturally-specific view that children have the obligation to be happy and childhood should be spent happily playing, free from the cares of the adult world (Wyness, 2006). The UNCRC embodies the paradox between the child protectors and the child liberationists, because both need to co-exist. Governments can introduce legislation to support children's play, but we still need practical and collective wisdom to make those rules work. Once we begin to blur the boundaries between these ideas that are set up as opposites, it might become easier to work with the paradox in a dynamic way.

PRAGMATICUS: How?

KATYDID: Perhaps by looking beyond things-in-themselves and towards the relationships between things. Take rights, for example. Rather than things held by autonomous individuals, rights arise or are infringed through the relationships between people, histories, systems, objects, resources and so on. Or take play. Rather than a thing to be provided, playfulness can emerge whenever the conditions allow. So maybe the responsibility of governments and adults in terms of children's play is to look to the conditions that support it rather than the play itself.

PRAGMATICUS: That's it?

KATYDID: That's it for now.

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