

Open Texts and Playful Readers

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Consider the game of "Flutterball." Suppose God creates the silver bubble of a closed world that angels can freely leave or enter and where they can move a lightening ball only by fanning it with their wings. But the player or players fluttering their wings to fan it cannot look to see it when fanning. They *can* not look. They are free to play or not play getting it into the opposing team's pearly gates. But, when fanning, there is no way to see the ball.... Since angels are eternal, the games may run into each other continuously: a game is won and a new game starting whenever, for example, the score is a pair of prime numbers with a difference of more than two. If God as an incarnate angel agrees to join them for a game of flutterball, God also can not look or else, having looked, God would have changed the rules of that game bubble, and it would be some other game or nothing.

Victor Yeleverton Haines

Although play has been much discussed in recent years, and there have been tight arguments as well as much loose talk, it remains a genuine scholarly topic. There is the much still to be said.¹ Transforming a phrase from Italo Calvino, play might be

compared to a background noise, always present, an undertone that lurks stealthily in the most dispassionate discussions; even when you are being most serious (or think that you are), play surrounds your actions, hovering above or burrowing just below. Are you really serious? Are there rules that your actions follow? If so, where did they come from? Is there an angle from which they might seem arbitrary? Is there a larger context within which your actions play out, and are judged, evaluated or compared to variant actions? Do your serious actions ever seem to take place within a delimited domain? If so, is there any way it could be called an arena, a field, a pitch, a magic turf? The concept of play, once reflected upon, indicates that you can never be too confident about your own seriousness.

Play can also become a clamorous din, rushing into the foreground, dominating every discussion, claiming even the most focussed attention. Something will have become overtly playful. It will have drawn attention to itself as a game being played. Play is everywhere and always, as background din or foreground clamour, an ineradicable dimension of human life. Being momentarily enclosed with a game's rules or to execute well, perhaps perfectly, a skill, or to command a relevant strategy, can be an overwhelmingly heady experience. Only to see skills perfectly executed (watching the Olympics, say) may be among a person's most exciting moments. Play may constitute the richest experience of a person's life. Unhappily, play may also be thoroughly sham. Anyone who has visited a theme park or even wandered about in a

discussion to play at the expense of game; for another, it will make it difficult even to distinguish between the two. In a wide-ranging bibliographical essay on recent studies of play and game theories, Scott notes that Warren Motte, in the course of several books (including the important *Playtexts*), "makes no attempt at all to draw distinctions between play and game" (Scott, "Playing the Games We Read" 381). This, I would suppose, shows the burden of Huizinga's inheritance. Diane Ackerman's study of play, though it is elegant (as a reader might have expected in advance) and passionate, scarcely moves out from his shadow and is, as she observes, a "fantasia" on a theme that has already played a part in (18). Ruth Burke's little book claims that its purpose is to demonstrate the viability of play as a "literary-aesthetic principle," but largely fails to do this and, along the way to this failure, it also neglects to say much about the scholarly discussion that has taken place about the very topic she has chosen to write about. Her book is, as Scott caustically observes, neither playful nor theoretical. It is he concludes "a slight piece of work," that does not "manage to illuminate its chosen field either widely or well" (Scott 384-85). Bettina L. Knapp's study of gambling draws upon Huizinga to define the space of gambling as an enclosed, quasi-divine theatre of play. Eleanor Cook's study of "the games poets play" proceeds without a definition of either key term, and indeed without much sign of conscious method. (It could be thought to be rather amazing that an academic publisher, in this case Stanford UP, would not require one of its authors to use terms with definitions or at least to stipulate shadow-definitions.) Sonderegger's encyclopaedia article summarizes the tradition in play theory from Schiller to Huizinga. She also touches upon the positions taken by Gadamer, Barthes and Derrida. However, as Scott points out about Burke's study, Derrida ought to "loom very large indeed," but does not (384). Gordon E. Slethaug's two encyclopaedia articles, in particular the one on "Theories of Play/Freeplay," remain the best short introductions to the problem available.

1 Although I am primarily concerned with Brian Edwards' *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction* and Steven D. Scott's *The Gaminess of American Postmodernism: John Barth & Louise Erdrich*, both complex studies of play and game (and the relation of these two concepts to postmodernism), I must acknowledge that a great deal has been written in English in recent years on the topic of play. Nearly all of these studies take a single aspect of the theory of play and game and attempt to use it as a platform for textual analysis. That is, unlike Scott and Edwards, they are not genuinely scholarly efforts to understand a complex cultural/literary phenomenon, but may well be, as in the case of William A. Gleason, an attempt to understand something else. Gleason's book is a masterful study of empirical games played in the United States. However, from the standpoint of a theory of play and game, it is rather like the long list of games in Rabelais: informative, fascinating even, but not a theoretical project. The most common position is to assume the conclusion of Johann Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* that play is a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with disposition all of its own" (8), a "spatial separation" from ordinary life (19). Play, he argues, necessarily takes place on a turf, or in a world, of its own (20, 10). It is probable that a study of play that cannot advance beyond this dictum, or cannot extrapolate from it, will be inadequate. (It was good that Huizinga made this point, but there should be more to say, and new points to explore.) For one thing it will narrow

shopping mall will have encountered mechanical forms of play. They exist because play, even in its merest illusion, is good business. People like to believe that they, brilliant individuals with spontaneous natures, are open to unexpected playfulness and fun. The illusion that they are playing, that they are having (a kind of) public fun, will more easily inspire them to consume products and activities. Having established the illusion of play, businessmen can always persuade people to spend money. Still, if you walk through a mall, casting a cold eye, you will probably see how contrived it all is. No one will dance or sing. There will be no buskers. Above all, there will be no spontaneous games. It will be as impersonally contrived, if less self-focussed, as a casino. If you tried genuinely to play in a mall or theme park, actually to play as you might on a playground or an empty field, or if you attempted to introduce a bit of true carnival, the security people would hustle you out very quickly. You would be lucky not to end up on your ear in the parking lot.² If you can avoid sham play, the genuine action may count among your most intense, and quite unforgettable, episodes. Years later, you may suddenly quiver and tingle with the flashing memory of a moment's play.

What is *play*? Is it a simple activity, a spontaneous expense of energy, or is it a kind of structure, a disciplined expenditure of energy? Is it self-fulfilment or the submersion of self within an external structure? Considered more closely, play seems more like a movement within a structure, or (perhaps) an openness within closure. May a child simply hanging from the branch of a tree be said to *play*? If it is play, is it similar, or dissimilar, to the play that occurs when a grandmaster in chess feints with a pawn gambit or when a pitcher in baseball throws a pitch so close to the inside boundary of

2 You could more freely urinate upon the carpet in a casino than you could engage in spontaneous play. (In fact, studies have shown that "players," both male and female, do commonly urinate on carpets as they "play" slot/poker machines. Following a primitive sense of luck, they are trying to reserve for themselves the luck that they believe has been built up while playing a particular machine. Casino managements largely accept this practice. They do not accept genuine playfulness.) Huizinga saw the proliferation of "false play" in the modern world and, perhaps gloomily, considered it to be a great danger to civilization. ("True play knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself... [211].) He saw very little in official forms of public play, "the whole rignarole of collective voodoo and mumbo-jumbo" (205), that reminded him of true play. The twenty-first century contains few signs of play that would attract Huizinga's enthusiasm. You can see sham play (or "shamplay") everywhere because it is a successful marketing strategy. It has become commonplace. It is also an aspect of certain professional mythologies. You can esteem yourself more highly if you can persuade others that your profession is playful. It is taken as a badge of genius that the process of discovery is a mode of play. Scientists, philosophers, not only literary theorists, are playful, even when they are not. The illusion of play can mask a great deal of bleak seriousness and banal careerism. Cass examines the secret grimness beneath the masks of play in Silicon Valley. Wilson looks at the very unplayful mechanical forms of play in a large shopping mall.

the strike zone that the batter jerks back and is forced ineffectually to pull his swing?³ Scott begins his chapter on the definition of play by citing from Eugen Fink that "play is an essential element of man's ontological makeup, a basic existential phenomenon" (29). (Obviously, Fink's dictum, loaded as it is with unexamined assumptions about human beings and their "ontological makeup" is marvellously contentious, but works well as a place to begin a discussion.) Working through a number of the most important theorists of play (Karl Gross, Johann Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jacques Ehrmann, and Jacques Derrida), Scott concludes, citing Derrida, that play is a "continuing series of endlessly deferred meanings, of dead ends come alive, of illusions, of allusions, of slippery, shifting differences" (39). Finally, the initial consideration of Fink's phenomenological thinking is seen to lead to its own reversal in Derrida: in play there is a "refusal of neat closure," as well as an anarchic "evasion of precise definition" (40) such that, if there is, indeed, any "ontological makeup" in which play necessarily figures, it is structure itself (where there will always be, as Derrida argues, an irreducible free play, or movement within its evidently rigid confines). The "play" of a game, or of a literary text, will be found in the way its (axiomatically) inflexible rule-structure will give and shift. Rules and conventions (which Wilson, at least in *Palamedes*, sees as radically distinct, nearly as much so as axioms and recipes) exist along a continuum, not on either side of a "knife-edged border" and, as a result, the "boundaries between game and non-game can waver" (61-62).

In both Scott's and Brian Edwards's studies, each displaying his debt to Derrida, openness and indeterminateness constitute fundamental attributes of play. (This is a major problem, and a key move in the arguments of both studies; I shall return to the issue later in this review.) Much traditional play theory, as found in Schiller and Huizinga, and restated in such books as those by Ackerman and Burke, stresses both

3 The figure of the child hanging from a branch comes from Istvan Szabó's short film *Square* (1963). Wilson employs it to mark the difference between play and game: "The camera periodically returns to him, punctuating the fluid sequence of informal play. In mere play, a child might hang from a branch because it is fun to do so (the sensation of gravity, the feeling of swinging, or sensing muscles work; the fun of such play might come in many shapes); in a game, the rule of hanging *until* it is necessary to let go supplements, and thus transforms, the activity" (*Palamedes* 77-78). Scholarly discussions of play draw upon a wide range of metaphors. (It is a small, though hardly inconsequential, game in itself: transform the fluidity of play into the tight-structuredness of game by imposing a metaphor.) Wilson takes his metaphors primarily from chess. Scott draws largely upon baseball and even includes a note that is a meta-commentary upon this practice (129-30). Edwards, though he might have consistently employed metaphors derived from Australian Rules football, employs a wide range of cultural practices to illustrate, and metaphorize his theory of play. If there is a single central metaphor in Edwards's discussion, it is reading. In that activity, he finds the image of all exploration, all free entry into the crisscrossed pathways of unknown structures.

the self-enclosed nature of play and its voluntary character.⁴ (No one can force you to play; you must have what Suits calls a "lusory" attitude; though certainly you might find yourself compelled to "go through the moves.") Edwards, working through much the same history of play as Scott (though sagaciously including Nietzsche), argues that play is most clearly seen in the kind of openness found in Plato: as "freedom, game, verbal battle, role-playing, competition, levity and ludism," it is a "basic component of language, art, philosophy and political practice" (19). Play, he concludes, must co-exist with work and seriousness, not "as some repressed other, a displaced joker in the pack, but as the enabling factor itself, the principle of energy and difference" (70). Play may also be, as Edwards astutely observes, "an attitude of mind, a perspective on life or on being in the world, together with actions manifesting this attitude" (17). It shows up everywhere, in all human activity; it is at once self-defining, energizing a limited and confined activity, and a mode of exploration and discovery.

Some people, and some situations, seem playful even before a move has been made. However, it is these playful actions that raise the most problems. What are they? How does one recognize them? Is everything in human culture such an action? Are there special classes of these actions? A game is such an action, but is a text? What about a cultural practice? A simple gesture?⁵ Whatever the action, it may be the case

4 Ackerman gives lapidary expression to Huizinga's position. "For humans," she writes, "play is a refuge from ordinary life, a sanctuary of the mind, where one is exempt from life's customs, methods and decrees. Play is always a sacred place — some version of a playground — in which it happens. The hallowed ground is usually outlined, so that it's clearly set off from the rest of reality" (6). Later she adds, "From time to time, this book becomes a fantasia on a theme by Huizinga, in which I play with some of his ideas, amplify them, follow their shadows and nuances" (18).

5 Take gestures made with the hands as an example. There are many such moves and they vary, though never entirely, from culture to culture. Giving someone the "fig" (or the "Spanish fig"), a gesture executed by poking the thumb of the right hand up between the first and second fingers, in Shakespeare's England would be an insult, rather like give someone the "finger" today, unless it were done "in play." That seems clear enough. Still, there is a problem about the gesture itself. Would it have had any meaning if it had not been determined by a cultural rule? Suppose that it was made with deadly serious intent — to insult, to hurt, to solicit a fight or a duel! — and without the least suspicion of fun, chivvying, carnivalesque mockery. It would still be play in the sense that some rule, or rules, hidden in the social fabric of the culture made it possible, gave it significance and, most importantly, indicated who could, and who could not, be insulted in this fashion. You would not give the "fig" to the Queen nor the "finger" to your children. This is a point that Chambers makes with considerable clarity. Moves are determined by rules; rules are never easily, or perhaps fully, known. You can speak in your native language, no doubt lucidly and well, but how fully have you grasped its *langage*? Imagine this further instance. Many years ago, I was sitting in a small restaurant on a back street in Lisbon, trying to read a local newspaper while I ate. Abruptly I noticed a very large man, sitting at a table cater-corner to my own, who was looking directly at me while pulling down his lower right eyelid with his thumb. A tiny patch of pink flesh beneath his eyeball was revealed, thought to what end I could not possibly guess. He repeated the gesture several times, and each time I grew more apprehensive

that, as Edwards also observes, "play exceeds the game" (7) and, indeed, that the "potential for play exceeds any particular configuration of it" (167). A game, and indeed any cultural practice insofar as it is playful, narrows the spirit of play, crystallizes it and makes it conspicuously, loudly even, apparent. This distinction is unmistakable in Victor Yelverton Haines's fable of the game of "flutterball" which I have used as an epigraph for this essay. The angels play, no doubt with all the intense pleasure that angels can achieve, but when they fan a ball through the opponents' gates, they cannot see. Even God, if He were to play, could not look (and still play the game). In the moment of scoring, the game properties dominate, actually obscuring the play. The fixedness of rules, the condition of being a definite practice, a "game" of some kind, takes control and solidifies the fluid motions of play. All the graceful play, the brilliant motions and mouth-opening celerity, of the angels becomes lost, frozen for the briefest imaginable instant, as the ball of lightning passes through the gates and marks the presence of a game. A game solidifies play, making it a transaction within the context of rules (at least one): at once less than and more determinate than play.⁶ And

(wondering what kind of overture, or move, he was attempting to make). Eventually, seeing that I did not understand him, he pointed at the waitress, a lovely young woman. I inferred that his gesture was intended to call my attention to the waitress and, somewhat later in Coimbra, querying Portuguese friends, I learned that it was a common gesture, and by no means simple, by which men noted the presence of a pretty woman. Pulling the eye open conveyed the suggestion that the other person should pay attention, "cast his eye" perhaps; the exposed pink flesh beneath the eyeball metaphorized the pinkness of the female genital slit. Thus the (complex) gesture indicated that the person should look for a pretty woman. I had no idea of the rules that made this cultural gesture meaningful and when I learned (of) them, I found them quite opaque. Months later when I returned to Australia, I had an occasion to use this Portuguese gesture "in play". No one understood it. When I explained it, everyone agreed that it was thoroughly disgusting. It had not been disgusting in Lisbon and not a single person in Portugal with whom I discussed the gesture had thought that it was.

As most other contemporary theorists of play, Edwards accepts Bernard Suits's proposition that a game requires the presence of constitutive rules, at least one. A constitutive rule determines the structure of play within a game and cannot be ignored (as observing the ball of lightning "fluttered" into a goal would ignore the rule) without changing the game. Take away a constitutive rule and the game will cease to exist or else become a different game. A merely regulatory rule, governing the size of equipment or the number of substitutions, could be changed any number of times. In chess, constitutive rules determine the distinct moves of each class of piece and the procedures of checkmate. The rules governing such matters as "touch-move" or *en passant* and, especially, the all-important matter of time (and clocks), are all regulatory. However, many interesting theoretical questions slipped through the uneven-mesh of Suits's net. What is the ontological reality of a rule? (Is it a conceptual construct only? Does it exist, latent or pulsating with its energy to manifest itself, in some larger context, such as a cultural discourse?) Do changes in a constitutive rule actually change a game? Could not Haines's angels agree only to blink without transforming or yet destroying their game? (Then they might not see, but then they might.) The history of many games shows that they have changed profoundly at different times, but they are still, so far as I can tell, the same game. The change from drop kicks to forward passes did not fundamentally change American football ("gridiron"), although

so it *may* make sense to claim, as Edwards does, that play exceeds game.⁷ And then, at the moment when it all seems so clear, Scott reminds you that the game itself is still in play, still shifting and, in the instant of its maximum definiteness, open.

At least, that is the way it often seems. You assume that you are being genuinely playful. You may even assume that, like a healthy puppy, play is essential to your being even a deep level of your "essence." The opportunities for play come along and you respond, bending to the momentary configurations of the rules, *qua* playful being. And yet the moves that you make may have been already determined by the rules that are hidden within the culture that surrounds you. You can never simply wave or beckon (say), but you will perform those actions in culturally prescribed ways. Constitutive rules in games and other modes of play (if there are any), it has been argued, indirectly reflect (mimic or exemplify) other rules, more distant conceptually and less evident, that lie hidden. In what? Discourse, perhaps. Speech acts, Ross Chambers argues, are

it was a fundamental change (and entailed a change in the shape of the ball). Neither did the prohibition of the Rugby-like lateral pass beyond the line of scrimmage change gridiron into some other game. Scott's analysis of the rule problem in play/game theory is brilliant (49-59) and his conclusions, differing somewhat from Edwards', show reasons for accepting that conventions do slide into (and out of) rules. For Scott, gridiron and Rugby may be two different games, with diverging histories, but they continue to mirror each other, to resemble each other and to solicit each's theoretical (and practical, too) participation in the other. The theorists of any activity tend to find its conceptual analysis more exciting than its history. Nowhere is this more clearly the case than in the theoretical models of play. Only Mihai Spariosu has dealt extensively with the actual history of play, largely (as his titles suggest) with Classical literature and philosophy. However, reading Spariosu, you can hardly fail to reflect that a little attention to conceptual analysis would not have hurt the clarity of his argument.

It may sound reasonable, but there are difficulties inherent in the claim that play "exceeds" game. Where is (what is?) play before it displays itself (in game)? Edwards seems to adopt (what has become) a standard position in the theory of play: play, viewed in a Schilleresque light, is always spontaneous, unregulated energy, at once ready to burst forth (in the energies of self-fulfilment) and to assume the confining structures of a game. (Note the use that Wilson makes of the boy hanging from a branch in Szabó's film.) However, Scott, rather bravely, argues that it is "not true, as Edwards claims, that game is 'subsumed' by play ... play does not take the place of game; it does not drive game out. Instead, game structures play, and thereby makes play itself possible" (3). These may not be unreconcilable positions. Perhaps there are no ungamed modalities of play (despite the boy hanging from the branch), nor any conceivable play that is "pure," neither limited nor defined by an empirical game-structure. There might still be a vast distinction between the urge to play (Schiller thought that play was an "instinct," a drive or *Trieb*) and the actualizing forms that it must take. It is an old paradox, cherished by many scholars, that the Self only expresses itself through self-repression (as poetry is often said to be "free" only when it is confined by such structures as rhyme-scheme, metre and cadence); that is, through the structures that it assumes within a cultural discourse. Hence the problem of play's relation to game may be compared to the even more puzzling relationship between thought and language. What is thought without language (or some other symbol-system) to express it? What is the relationship between a wheel and its spin?

to discourse acts as moves are to rules (96). Are you certain that you need to know them in order to follow them? What about the multiple modes of false play (those casinos and malls, for example)? Are they members of some, large flexible kind? Will you count sham play as true play? It is quite possible that you have *never* played at all other than in a game or in some game-like context. It is even possible that you have not understood, or at least fully grasped, the many games you have played. These are some of the major questions surrounding the problem of play that still need a theoretical account.

For both Edwards and Scott the problem of play quickly becomes the many-headed problem of game. Most theorists of game assume that a game is either a rule-structure (the static view) or else a rule-governed activity (the dynamic view). It would be difficult to imagine a game that had no constitutive rules (at least one) and no determining structure, but it might be possible.⁸ (A game could be what happens in a given context: an outcome, result or up-shot. It could be, looking back over its lines

8 On kinds, see Hacking, *passim*; on Hacking on kinds, see Robertson (258-59). A kind is a large category, or other grouping, that collects multiple entities. A super nova belongs to a peculiar kind, but so does a pizza. Hacking thinks that certain kinds, such as super novae, have inherent structures and, thus, cannot be modified by human interaction; others, such as pizzas, are subject to what he calls a "looping effect" (Hacking 34, 105-08) in which human observation contributes to the modification of the kind. A game would seem to be a flexible kind in most respects; however, re-designing a constitutive rule might, it seems, destroy rather than modify a game (such as "flutter-ball"), displaying a looping effect with built-in annihilative power.

9 Theorists of game have often been captivated by fantastic games and speculative forms of play. For example, "fairy chess" (a kind of chess assuming additional squares, pieces or moves) seems particularly attractive. Wilson's *In Palamedes' Shadow* refers to the Royal Game of Ur, a game known only through its "wooden materialities" (a phrase from Nabokov), a beautiful board and pieces but lacking known rules (257 fn. 48). (An image of the Royal Game also appears, proleptically, as a cover design for his book and, dissolved into its constituent squares, as an internal dingbat.) Chess has often given theorists of game an example to support analysis and, nearly as often perhaps, provided literary texts. Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and Nabokov's *The Defense* spring to mind, with an underlying structure. Nick Bantock invents a number of fascinating unplayed games in his *The Museum at Purgatory* (48-57). They suggest both the pluriform inventiveness of the human mind, with respect to play, and the arbitrariness of game-structures. A fantastical, or purely conceptual and speculative, game has the power to focus thinking. In effect, it is a small thought experiment. Even more to the point, conceptual games underscore the boundary between games and texts. A game that cannot be, or has never been, played may actually be a literary text (as are Bantock's games, though, since he luminously illustrates them, they may also be works of art). The curators of the British Museum have created a set of rules for the Royal Game of Ur (the next time you visit, you may buy an attractive version of the board game for thirty or so pounds), but they cannot be certain that these rules are the actual rules which (once) governed play. It is still, a "wooden materiality" that, however beautiful, is unplayable in any certain historical sense. Conceptual games, however frustrating for a player yearning to express a latent luscious attitude, take you directly into the problem of literature. Are (can be) literary texts games? This problem centrally concerns both Scott and Edwards.

of play, what play became.) Both Edwards and Scott (more or less) accept Suits' definition of game: that to play a game engages you in an effort to "achieve a specific state of affairs" (your prelusory goal), using only the rules and what they allow (your lusory means), even when these are notably inefficient and do so with an attitude of mind that permits you to accept such an inefficient and rule-governed activity (your lusory attitude) merely for the fun, or joy, of overcoming "unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 41). Defining a game according to its rules, or the kind of structure that the rules determine, leads directly to a further problem in classification. Roger Cailliois' four-part classification — *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo) — have given theorists of game a "useful way to classify and group play and game" (Scott 36), but also a default position from which to begin analysis. Once you know that you are looking for a rule-structure (of some kind), the path of analysis might seem quite straight-forward. Yet it is precisely at the point of this recognition that Derrida, and poststructuralism generally, come into play. Every structure (there can be no exceptions) remains open and decentred. It is impossible to fix it firmly and tightly. You can never say that X is precisely such and such, or only that, or no more than that (its parameters exactly known, its quantities measured, its Xness fully determined). Something elusive always torments the human desire to fix reality. Edwards takes Derrida's deconstructive principles as a means for shifting the analysis of game to the reader and the inevitable openness of reading. Deconstruction, he argues, "supports a view of the text as writing without ontological status and of reading as a process of shifting negotiation and re-adjustment" (57). The reader is "both player and played" (49). Scott, on the other hand, follows Derrida into a view of game structures, or gamefulness, as continuously open. There is more to game, he observes in quoting Allen Thiher, "than merely following rules" (59). The "boundaries between game and non-game can waver" and there is even a sense (poststructuralist *par excellence*) "in which gamefulness and the detection of gamefulness are constructivist exercises." Scott opts for the "weak" theory of rule-structures that such structures play (and are always already *in* play), though they play "within limits and borders and rules" (62). Nothing in the consideration of Edwards' and Scott's books, both rich and excellent studies of a complex problem, is quite as fascinating as their divergent uses of Derrida and the deconstructionist notion of open, or free, play. One the one hand, play outlines the exploratory (heuristic, adventurous) activity of reading; on the other, it points out the delusive structure of the game.

With their distinct, though congruent, senses of openness in mind, it is possible to ask the important question, Is literature a game (or gameful)? Are (can be) literary texts games? Can you play a novel? Is reading an act of play? Could you invent a novel as you might a game (Wittgenstein thought not)? If the answer is "yes" to these questions, can several people play the same game? The titles of both books contain the

term "postmodern" and that, perhaps, indicates the direction in which an answer lies. There are certainly ways in which anything might be a game or be converted into a plaything; however, a text would not become a game (in any serious sense) merely because I decided to use its physical condition as a book (or its embodiment in/as a book), rather than a horseshoe or a quoit, in a pitching game. Scott discusses the problem of "easy" ways to take a text as a game (41-43) and moves immediately to the true difficulty. In what ways does the textual intricacy of a literary work, its structure or net of (possible) paths, resemble, or even constitute, a game? In this investigation, postmodern texts serve his ends well just as they do Edwards'. I think that it is clear that *if* postmodern texts are games, or can be played as games, then it will follow that other kinds of literary texts, even the most traditional and genre-bound, will also open themselves to play and, in some sense, become games. You might, as a reader, have to play harder to find the game. However, Scott does propose a rule for postmodern fiction that defines it contextually and sets its limits. (In either the sense of its boundaries or its potential.) When you read a postmodern novel, you must know what you are doing and read "postmodernly"; that is, with a lusory intention to "look for the limits, the borders, the signs of the parameters of the discourse, the limits of the fiction" (60). The postmodern novel is a kind of "artefact" that exists as a "rule maker and a playful convention trespasser at one and the same time" (61).¹⁰

10 What is *postmodernism*? A conflicted term, with multiple significance, it would be impossible to offer a straight-forward definition. (And neither Edwards nor Scott actually do so.) Some scholars, such as Linda Hutcheon and Ihab Hassan, have argued for complex models of indeterminate (or playful) textuality. Frederic Jameson argues for the use of "postmodern" as a period term (the intricate socio-cultural *NOI*) to describe all cultural phenomena produced within the historical moment of Late Capitalism. Jean-François Lyotard has taken the rejection of "master narratives," and the consequent turning to small stories and local games, to be the postmodern benchmark. American scholars, notably Jonathan Arac, often use the term to indicate the movement of the margins against the centre, the disenfranchised against the bastions of power. (Thought of in these terms, the writing of women, blacks and Chicanos might all be considered as "postmodern" merely in existing at all.) In a rather similar way, other scholars link "postmodernism" to "poststructuralism." Thus postmodern *jeux d'esprit*, and/or attacks upon conventional (or traditional) textual stability, are seen to reflect the poststructuralist perturbation of argument or else the Foucauldian unmasking of unexamined power structures. (Indeed, in the last sense, all the modern "masters of suspicion," Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, may be seen to play into the significance of "postmodern.") Clearly, given such multiplicity, it would be impossible to combine all these approaches in a single model. It is probably not even possible to nod dispassionately at them all. John Barth, both Scott and Edwards might hasten to remind you, has written vividly on more than one occasion about the range and variety of "postmodernism" (Barth, *The Friday Book* 62-76, 193-206; *Further Fridays* 113-26, 291-310). Barth's writing demonstrates, if nothing more, that a complex practice, call it "postmodernism," can claim control of its own self-conscious theory. Both Scott and Edwards attempt to navigate the conflicting claims of the diverse senses of "postmodern." Both acknowledge Jameson. Both cite from Lyotard. (Only Edwards draws much upon Bakhtin, primarily to clarify the important concept of "exchange.") Still, it seems clear that they each prefer, or at least that their ends are best served by, the (kind of)

Grounding his argument as determinedly upon deconstructive principles as Scott does, Edwards shifts the problem of game back to one of play. The game exists, not in its putative structure (however intricate and flexible), only in its being played. Similarly, a literary text may be a game, but only in the sense that in being read it is also being played. Deconstruction, Edwards writes, "supports a view of the text as writing without ontological status and of reading as a process of shifting negotiation and re-adjustment" (57).¹¹ Reading is exploratory and heuristic. Thus, in his local mythology of players and arch-players, Edwards deprivileges Daedalus the builder and affirms

... Ariadne's thread as not one but infinitely multiple ... deconstruction appropriates the labyrinth, that already popular figure for the mesh of language and the ways of postmodernist fiction, and locates Theseus in an unending maze of forking pathways ... the questing reader participates in a game removed from ontological authorities, one in which the magical threads, far from pointing to the exit, become the complex tracery of the labyrinth itself. For the deconstructionist, as for Scheherazade, there can be no end to the story-telling. (55)

The reader is both played and a player. The communication (if there is one) between text and reader is always already a "gamesome exchange" (49). Postmodern texts, in particular, offer opportunities for playful transgressions (79) through their emphasis upon "slippage, difference and duplicity" (87).

Edwards's highly analytic account of play theory follows a two-headed approach. First, he examines the status of the relevant theory (the current state of play, you might say) and then he examines a number of recent "gamesome exchanges" in novel-

literary/textual model developed by Hassan and Hutcheon. And both draw, diversely it may be, from Derrida and deconstruction so that they *seem* open to the claim of the postmodern to be, at its heart, the poststructuralist. Scott observes that the "most important terms in the various discourses that constitute postmodernism are 'boundary' and 'border', terms that appear frequently in postmodernism as themes, as strategies, as obsessions" (8). Edwards, having navigated much the same territory, concludes that textual exuberance (of the kind that Hassan analyses) "must somehow contend too with ideas of decadence, scepticism, weariness and wariness, not as hypothetical others in a simple binary construction, the darker sides of becoming, but as explicit cultural considerations" (85). That is, the path that Hassan points out (and Hutcheon, too) can never be altogether different than the dissimilar way that Jameson maps.

A term such as "re-adjustment" marks, fairly precisely, the difference between Edwards and Scott on the game status of literary texts. For Scott it is the structure itself of a game that shifts and endlessly opens to re-adjustment; for Edwards, it is the reader's reading that must remain open to re-adjustment. In both cases, there is no single, or even *ur*, game, but only an inexhaustible spectrum of games. Each "game" is a nest of "games." "Flutberball" would be as various, and as utterly endless, as the mind of God might make it. In many versions of the game, He might both look and not look.

writing, American (Thomas Pynchon and John Barth), Australian (Peter Carey), British (Angela Carter) and Canadian (Robert Kroetsch), both to test and to illustrate the conclusions of the theoretical section. Scott pursues a similar two-headed approach examining two American writers, John Barth and Louise Erdrich, to exemplify his theoretical account. Since both writers turn to Barth (though Edwards emphasizes *Letters*; Scott, *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*), it makes sense to conclude by comparing their two accounts.

Every literary scholar should be able to designate a writer more purely textual, more artifactual or more dedicated to formal obsessions, than any other. It is doubtful that any two such nominations would agree. However, among scholars who would take contemporary American literature into consideration, John Barth would probably have a place at some point in the list. Few writers seem quite so devotedly to be a heresiarch of "meta" as Barth. His fiction fairly bulges with self-reference, with allusions and intertexts (both to his own previous writing and to the history of literature) and with nearly countless varieties of textual play. In such a diversity of meta, mere metafiction proves to be only a single element among many. Edwards, challenging while accepting this initial account of Barth's fiction, begins his discussion of *Letters* in asserting that "affirmations of artifice do not separate the text from the world, or play from reality" (144). Scott begins by urging that Barth's play "is purposeful" (65). Barth's fiction may overflow with obscure allusions and entangled networks of references (cross and self), with all the uncountable shapes of meta, but it also engages the world. He is also, as Scott insists, a professional writer (66) who knows a vast amount, even in scholarly depth, about the work of other writers. In *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*, Barth creates a postmodern story cycle in which "he borrows what is needed, adds what is lacking, crosses borders and boundaries when he needs to do so" (67). Edwards sees *Letters* as a "postmodern work," but one that "addresses, interrelatedly, three aspects of past-ness — American history, Barth's previous writings and the history of the novel" (145). The letters in *Letters* are about "the world" and make a case that postmodern fiction can be "a repository of cultural analysis and commentary" (146–45). Above all, Edwards argues that *Letters* embodies a "Game of History" (169). Scott sees the "merging of opposites" in *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* and its "precarious negotiations of boundaries" to constitute its structure and shape and to be "what makes it literature; and, not incidentally, what makes it game-like" (95). Scott would probably agree with Edwards that metafiction "regenerates fiction." It is slightly less clear that he would also agree that "meta-perspectives" within a text are a "ruse" by which "seriousness may be interleaved with laughter and the parameters of play shifted to a new level of engagement" on which artifice may be seen "as the very condition of the lexical playing field itself" (Edwards 174). He seems to see the postmodern novel, and perhaps all narrative, as more purely

textual than Edwards does: a lexical playing field in which intertexts, rather like templates, "provide contexts and give the novel its distinctive shape, texture, heft" (95). The world shrinks (from theory as well as from view) in postmodern fiction, hiding itself from the reader; and then it reasserts itself, flamboyantly displaying itself where it had not before been noticed.

The game of "flutterball" illustrates the (apparently) irreducible puzzles of theorizing game and play, the game-like and the playful. Flutterball is played in a "silver bubble of a closed world" which seems to exclude external influences. There are no worlds outside the game, at least while it is being played. Yet different games, since the players are eternal, may run into each other, bubble crashing into bubble, and overlap. The players themselves bring their own angelic natures along. If God plays, and He may, then He must either change His nature or the game. Nonetheless, all things being possible when He plays, even within a game bubble, He may both look and not look, change and leave unchanged the game. Theorists such as Edwards and Scott (and perhaps I should include Ackerman, too) make it clear how unclear such an apparently simple (though actually complex) experience as play truly is. They clarify the interrelationship between world and text, and between play and other activities (such as reading and writing), but they cannot close the text they have opened. What they do, and this is extremely valuable, is to show that the concepts of play and game must enter into the analysis of literature. You will understand literature more deeply, and ask more acute questions about it, once you have understood more about play and game. You will certainly stop make dumb statements about it, such as "All good literature is morally serious" or "All literature is simply play." Edwards concludes that "play is antithetical to rest" (273). That, in an always-open discussion, makes a good final word. Literature, whatever else, is not a restful experience.

Imagine a beach on a wet North Pacific shore. In 1999, at a point when I was reading Edwards's *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, I found myself on just such a beach. It was wide, bleakly wet and strewn with drift wood. Imagine it as wet, swept by frequent drizzles, but without steady rain. The sky is overcast and dispiriting gusts of thin wetness occasionally blow in from the sea. The surf is splendid, though. It rolls in regularly, no chopiness and no apparent rips, at more or less the right height for good body surfing. A few people duck into the surf, dancing on their toes, their bodies turned sideways to the breaking wave, and then retreat quickly. The water feels every bit as cold as it looks and the only surfers, far out on boards, wear wet suits. Yet it is a beautiful vista. Sunlight frequently breaks through the overcast. The waves are a glorious dark blue, almost gun-metal in richness. This blueness stands in sharp contrast to the rich green of the pine forests that enclose the beach. Huge rocks a short ways

off the beach at one end, veils of white foam surging around them, pines struggling upwards from each crevice, make the whole scene, like a late Flemish landscape, hauntingly beautiful.

A dog runs enthusiastically into the surf, in full canine vigour. It looks like a golden retriever, the darker, more russet-coloured type, but, its hair matted wet and dark from the sea, it is impossible to be certain. The dog runs out into the first line of breakers, plunges through into the trough and then rides the next breaking wave back onto the sand. The dog is body surfing and clearly as happy as a puppy in a warm basket. Somewhere on the beach, or out past several rows of breakers in a full-body wet suit, the dog's master, his head poking seal-like towards the beach, may be watching. But right now the dog is alone, surfing for its own pleasure, just being a dog at play. Another dog, this one more like a border collie mongrel, comes up to the edge of water, keeping a few paw-steps back from the quick fingers of foam while it watches the first dog play. It holds a short stick, obviously a piece of drift wood, in its mouth. When the first dog has ridden a breaker onto the sand, it sees the stick-holding collie and leaves the water. They exchange looks. Then they circle each other sniffing. Its pelt like seaweed, the stink of salt water must have given the golden retriever a startling, unusual stench. Now the collie offers its stick. Clearly, it wants to play. It shakes its head from side to side and then, with a vigorous necktwist, throws the stick just past the surfing dog's head. The collie watches the surfing dog intently and barks twice encouragingly. The golden retriever turns to consider the stick. After a moment's reflection, it picks the stick up and holds it for a few seconds. The collie watches hopefully. And then the golden retriever lets the stick fall. It darts back into the surf, but turns to watch the collie. It, too, makes two or three sharp, suggestive barks. Now the collie stands at the edge of the water, ripples of foam edging around its paws, and observes the surfing dog observe it. It rushes out into the water, finds itself swamped in the breaking wave, and retreats back to the sand. The golden retriever watches for a second or two and then dives through a wave into the trough. And now it waits, alone, a solitary player, to catch the next wave. The collie takes one last look and then trots off down beach.

Each dog wanted to play. Unhappily, their characteristic modes of play had been incompatible. Watching their inconclusive encounter, I was struck how similar it was to seeing two children, each with a strong desire to play, but each with very different games in mind, meet and then part on a playground. Though it may be, as many theorists have thought, a deep, driving urge towards self-expression and release (yet always a desire to mark off some small part of the actual world into a definite space: a magic turf or a tiny kingdom by the sea), play becomes possible only within the arbitrary, and irksomely rigid or confusingly shifting, confines of a game. What Scott

and Edwards have succeeded in doing is to show how significantly, and in what varied ways, this experience bears upon the study of literature.

San Francisco

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