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Playland: Technology, Self, And Cultural Transformation

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I opened the morning newspaper and was greeted with a front-page, banner-size headline and photo touting the dramatic win of the city's professional football team. The account of the game bristled with excitement. In smaller print at the top of the page was a report on the winning ways of a local basketball team. It was only in the nether regions of the page that I discovered reports on national and international affairs, all properly phrased in the monochromatic tones of impartial objectivity. Struck by the attention given to matters of sport, I became curious about the general content of the newspaper. Interestingly, the sports section proved to be substantially larger than the first and principal news section. The entertainment section also exceeded the size of the financial section. If I subtracted the advertisements from the pages, the portion of the paper devoted to playful matters was more than twice that of what one might call serious news. A few months later, an editorial in the paper opined that the name of this winning football team "is not only a piece of the town's; it also conjures its essence".

This composition of the news may be commonplace in today's world. But it was not so in the world of my youth, nor it seems in previous history. I have long appreciated the work of Johan Huizinga, whose classic study of play explored its deep historical roots (Huizinga 1938). Yet in making his case for a primordial basis of play, Huizinga primarily focused on somewhat rarefied cultural patterns, such as symbolic rituals, rites, and ceremonies. He also found play elements in battles, legal proceedings, and the arts. Play seemed omnipresent, but secreted into the interstices of cultural life. My curiosity increased. Is a shift in cultural investments now in motion, and if so, is it an important one? Has play truly become the dominant cultural activity? A scanning of statistics on professional sports in the US was provocative. Just in professional baseball, the gross revenues reached a record-breaking $7 billion in 2010. As the Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig announced: "This is the golden era for the sport, and given the (weak) economy this may be the most remarkable year we ever had. We're at numbers nobody ever thought possible". Paid attendance at the baseball games was over 73 million. For professional football, revenue was almost $8 billion, with 26 million paid fans and a television audience

of at least 500 times this number. Then there are the basketball and hockey seasons to consider, among others. When we consider the professional sports industry altogether, the gross revenues reached $414 billion in 2010. This figure exceeded the total revenues of the combined governments of Costa Rica, India, Lithuania, Bolivia, Chile, Finland, Morocco, Romania, and Pakistan during the same period.

Yet, I asked, is this interest restricted only to professional sports? Unlikely, since there is also an enormous interest in the US in college football and basketball. And in terms of games, we also find lively interest in golf, tennis, auto racing, and soccer (with independent cable channels exclusively dedicated to sports for continuous viewing), along with skiing, casino gambling, horse racing, gymnastics, skateboarding, online gambling, televised poker, and fantasy sports. Nor do I believe that investments in these activities begin to capture the extent of the gaming activity.

However, the most dramatic developments are surely in the virtual world. A homely example is telling, important as well, in suggesting that the shift toward play is not solely an American phenomenon. When visiting friends in the Netherlands, I was told that they were to entertain their grandchildren for the afternoon. Later, the two boys, three and five, burst into the house, and without more than a nodding acknowledgement of the assembled gathering raced upstairs. Their destination: the two computers in the upstairs office. Within minutes they were both absorbed in online games. They were allowed to remain so for an hour, at which point their cruel grandmother pulled the switch. It was human time again.

Such an event will scarcely be surprising to any young parents. At the present time, there are over 200 million websites related to computer games. One of these sites, chosen at random, offers 1,500 games, and has over 70,000 participants. Another offers games in over 40 languages. Players on the massively multiplayer online games such as those featured on Facebook and other social network sites, cater to over one hundred million participants a year. The participants spend over $1 billion annually. Video games, such as those sold for Xbox, garner far greater income. Revenues of video games now exceed 20 billion dollars internationally. Over 20 million players have spent 17 billion hours on Xbox Live, which is more than 2 hours for every person on the planet. Another 40 million users have registered PlayStation Network accounts.[1]

Among the major characteristics of games, as defined by scholars such as Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (1958), are that they are non-income producing activities, non-obligatory, and circumscribed in space and time. Further, as they see it, there are rules of participation (either explicit or implicit). Participation, in turn, evokes an alternative reality, a reality that has the

capacity to enchant or captivate. Defined in this way, it is legitimate to include within the cultural shift toward play, the shared indulgences in TV drama, movies, YouTube, online porn, pop music, romance novels, and social networks. On Facebook alone there are almost 650 million visitors in any given month, twice the size of the US population. As Timmermans (2010) and Pearson (2009) both describe, online activities are essentially playful. To summarize, it is useful to distinguish among three forms of play:

1. *Social play*, which constitutes the vast majority of communication taking place in social networks. Communication in this context not only creates a playful ambience, but it is also a place where people communicate about both spectator and participatory play thereby enhancing their significance.
2. *Spectator play*, which constitutes the vast range of spectator pleasures, as facilitated by television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and radio.
3. *Competitive play*, which consists of an enormous range of participatory competitive games including both electronic and organic games.

Let us characterize the general shift in cultural investments of attention, time, and money in these three spheres in terms of *Playland*, denoting a world in which the dominant cultural activities – along with the meaning these activities give to life – center on participation, either vicarious or active, in the forms of play.[2] If this lens of viewing cultural life carries legitimacy, numerous questions follow. How are we to understand, for one, the historical shift in cultural interests and investments? Further, putting aside the redistribution of time and money, what are the implications for cultural life? What becomes of relationships – with friends, family, community, and the like? Are there implications for the ways in which we come to understand ourselves, and the meaning of our lives? If the cultural implications are unsettling, what then follows in terms of action – both personal and in terms of policy?

In what follows I wish to open discussion on two domains of impact: the self and human relationships. The issues are both complex and profound, and in a circumscribed context such as the present, I can do little more than scan the terrain. My hope is that such a perambulating treatment can invite the kind of dialogue that will facilitate broad illumination and new forms of action.

The emergence of playland

Let us first consider possible reasons for what appears to be a major shift in cultural life. That play should come into such significance could be viewed

as highly surprising. In much of Western culture, and in the US in particular, the number of hours devoted to work has steadily increased. Indeed, in the US there is currently an attempt to establish a "Take Back Your Time" day, a day devoted to restoring leisure hours to the American worker. The manifesto of this movement points out, "an epidemic of over-work, over-scheduling and time famine now threatens our health, our families and relationships, our communities and our environment". Clearly, then, there are significant changes in the ways in which leisure hours are filled (and as we shall see, various venues of play have infiltrated the spaces of work). One might also reason that with increments in daily work demands, there might be a compensatory desire for play. By indulging in play – vicarious or active – tedium can be relieved and cares forgotten. I think now of the pivotal place that pachinko parlors play in Japanese life, for many years one of the few forms of escapist entertainment available to compensate for the rigors of a six-day workweek.

One cannot rule out the compensatory explanation for the burgeoning of play in contemporary culture. However, in my view, the chief driver of this cultural shift is the coalition of technology and business. Technological developments open new and highly lucrative business opportunities, and as these businesses profit, they also spawn new developments in technology. The impact of these twin forces must also be seen against a cultural and historical background. On the one hand, following Huizinga, there is a rich history of engagement in forms of play, and most relevant, forms of play that are contentious, in which protagonists are embattled or striving to achieve dominance over the other. As Roland Barthes (1972) has also pointed out, there is a strong tendency in this context to conflate issues of good and evil with winning and losing. One "fights" to achieve some end, and this end is often saturated with moral value. In effect, games possess enormous potential as resources for generating morally saturated drama. As Goldstein (1994) has pointed out, the blueprint for such drama is typically established within the first three years of life when one is developmentally prepared for rapt engagement in forms of play

Now, one may also argue that the number and range of real-life dramas is such that adults have little need for contrived games. In traditional terms, participation in play is considered essential to childhood development. However it is also thought that as one matures, play should be largely replaced by the active responsibilities of adult life. And these responsi-bilities – succeeding at work, achieving happiness in one's relationships, raising children, attending to issues of public importance, and the like – are loaded with dramatic significance. In each case, there is success and failure,

progress and decline, winning and losing, and good vs. evil. Why should these not fill the available space of dramatic engagement? Why should such dramas not demand our full attention? In my view, the answer lies in the ambiguities of the narrative forms that make drama possible.

To expand, in an earlier work (Gergen 1992) I proposed that the communication technologies of today facilitate the development of multiple meaning making clusters, that is, groups of people that co-construct visions of the real and the good. There are increasing numbers of groups – professional, political, religious, and so on – that make claims to "having it right" about the world. Simultaneously, these same technologies – now in the form of everyday media – saturate us with these various visions. For example, the question of how to invest one's savings has dramatic implications. One can win or lose, and the outcomes will make a significant difference to the quality of one's future life. Yet there are now scores of books treating the topic of investment, along with daily radio and television commentators, and stockbrokers and money managers who also provide informed decisions. The problem, however, is that there is substantial disagreement among these sources and opinions shift daily. In effect, there is no rational decision. Almost every choice is wise and unwise, promising and perilous. When life is a random walk, drama dissolves. The same can be said regarding many policy issues from the local to the national level. With the legion of talking heads thriving on contention, there is little clarity on whether we are progressing or regressing at any point. In the crush of disagreement, drama is dissipated.

Given this context, let us return to the twin impact of technology and business on the growth of playland culture. Consider the following: Technologies allow unlimited, low-cost participation in high-drama activities. Because of their relatively low costs, technologies such as television, the Internet, radio, cell phones, and video games are available to large and ever increasing sectors of the population. The most widely televised event in the history of the world was the 2010 World Cup. The Xbox game *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, was issued late in 2010, and now one will encounter at any time of day or night over a million fellow players – from all corners of the earth.

Technologies intensify the dramatic narratives (e.g. video games, professional sports). With the development of microscopic microchip technology, it became possible to increase dramatically the dimensions of electronic communication. The video industry is increasingly capable of generating realistic, life and death, sound-accompanied games. The dramatic engagement is intense. With the increasingly popular Nintendo Wii games, indeed the entire body is engaged in the game.

In terms of narrative meaning, most games offer increased opportunities for heroism. Games are typically about winning or losing, and accolades are reserved for those who win. Even those computer and cell phone games that demand hours of effort to increase one's skill offer the player steady increments in esteem for the self (Gee 2005). Further, even in the case of spectator games, fans take vicarious pleasure in identifying with the star players. Stories of "the stars" are everyday fare in newspapers and magazines, essentially generating the new cultural myths about men and women who are enshrined in the increasingly numerous "halls of fame". In playland, games offer continuous opportunities for homely heroism. Either vicariously or interactively, one becomes the major protagonist in the story.

In the narratives of daily life, play is highly consequential. Marriage and career success may hang in the balance, or on the national sphere, the games of war can bring death to hundreds of thousands. In playland, however, the drama is intense, but the consequences are minimal. In most video and computer games, one is continuously losing, but the loss serves only as an invitation to improve with the next turn. In the *Call of Duty: Black Ops* game, a player may be killed a dozen times within a five-minute period, only to rise each time from his prone position to resume the attack. One plays without the public shame of losing and without bodily risk.

As many commentators have argued, with the growth of modernism, and particularly with the spread of the scientific worldview, our capacities for enchantment have dwindled.[3] The prizing of objectivity – with its value-free approach to the world – demolishes drama. If there is nothing to value – no goals, no ideals, no transcendent virtues – then what is worth doing? The religions of the world continue to be sources of enchantment. However, in comparison to the enchanting power of games in the world today, religions are a poor competitor. There is a further catalyst to incitement in the form of social interchange. As games enchant, so do they invite conversation. And within conversation the game deepens in significance. It is an event about which people care, and thus, for example, the enormous crowds so dramatically engaged in the outcome of the World Cup.

We now turn to the question of cultural impact. Other than the obvious redistribution of time and money, in what ways is cultural life being transformed? How shall we regard these transformations, and are there ways in which we might alter our current behavior, from the forms of daily relations to national or global policy? If, as Huizinga proposes, "culture arises in the form of play," how are we to understand the emerging culture and how best to go on? These are scarcely new issues. For example, there has been considerable discussion about the impact of games on the brain

and our capacities for thought,[4] along with discussions of the educational potential of electronic games.[5] More expansively, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) have linked the gaming ethos to the development of global capitalism, corporate exploitation, and militarism. These are issues of such complexity that traditional attempts to establish clear answers are no longer relevant. Rather, the desire for certainty must be replaced by reflective and sustained dialogue. And such dialogue itself will alter the complexion of the phenomenon, since the phenomenon is not separate from the dialogue that sustains it. In this spirit, I wish to touch on only two issues: the self and relationships.

The playing self

In earlier writings I have been concerned with what may be viewed as an erosion in the Western conception of the self-contained individual, that is, the agent whose mental resources serve (or *should* serve) as an originary and efficacious source of action.[6] In part, I have traced this erosion to the increasingly dominant technologies of communication and the enormous increments in the relational processes they invite. As one's sense of self is increasingly absorbed into networks of relationships, I proposed, the sense of oneself as inherently social replaces that of self as an independent actor. In effect, the emerging technologies of the 20th century slowly subvert the legacy of the Enlightenment. In large measure I have welcomed this transformation in the conception of the person. Joining in the ongoing critique of individualism, I have argued that the vision of the world as composed of bounded or singular entities is inimical to human and planetary well-being. When relational conceptions of human action are fully extended, they invite consideration and appreciation not only of global interdependency, but environmental care.

It is within this context that I confront the emergence of playland culture. For it seems in this case one might well be inclined to see in this movement an extension and intensification of the agentive "I". After all, don't most games celebrate the individual strategist, who aspires to success, who vanquishes, who trains, plans, schemes, and carries out tactics for the purpose of winning? In the process of playing, personal agency is reified; individualism is refurbished. I am not denying this possibility, and particular gaming structures certainly lend themselves to such a result as opposed to others. Yet, in general, I am not persuaded. To explore further, I distinguished earlier between three forms of cultural play: social play,

spectator play, and competitive games. It is at this first level that my case for the erosion of the bounded self and the emergence of the relational being was largely based. E-mail, Facebook, cell phones, Twitter, and the like, all immerse us in the co-constituting process of communication. In each case, our actions are inherently "for the other" and without the other they lose meaning altogether. To abandon all one's interlocutors would eviscerate one's sense of self. Yet as Timmermans (2010) notes, the playful ambience of social network communication also generates a conflict between the impetus toward authenticity on the one hand, and artifice on the other. Paradoxically, one may simultaneously be both sincere and insincere. There is erosion in the obdurate sense of self, but not eradication.[7]

On the level of spectator pleasure, there is also a diminishment of the agentive "I", but the route is different. In this case the dominant pleasure is taken from the process of identification. While the concept of identification may be defined in many ways, I use the term to refer to one's fantasized narrative of self as the other. Because the drama of games is one typically featuring success vs. failure, or good vs. evil, the potential for games to generate heroic figures is great. Movie and television dramas yield a similar panoply of "gods" and "goddesses". As a spectator, the identification process may remain wholly in fantasy, for example, as one excitedly watches a favorite athlete perform on TV. However, such fantasies are also made more concrete in one's activities, such as purchasing apparel fetishizing the hero, or adopting the hero's mannerisms, gestures, or ways of life. The important point here is that when immersed in spectator pleasures, one brackets the sense of authentic being. One lives temporarily as the other.

In both these conditions we find an alteration in consciousness from the traditional sense of "I am the master of my actions" to an "out-of-self" condition. In the former case, "I am an actor for others", and in the latter case, "I experience as the other". Let us view these as subtle movements in terms of the emergence of a *second-order self*, a sense of self as other than self, or a state of para-being. At the more extreme level, the sense of a second-order self may characterize one's condition under the influence of a drug, or when sexually aroused, romantically infatuated, or fully immersed in a stage role. One is fully compelled by activities that might be described as ego-alien. These activities spin out spontaneously, without deliberate thought, and often surprisingly. Now consider the case of competitive games: I watch as my 12-year-old grandson sits in a special chair designed for online gamers. The chair approximates the seat of a jet fighter pilot or a motorcycle driver. His eyes are focused on the television screen, his hands grip precision controls for the events unfolding before him, and the booming

sounds of these clamorous events bellow from nearby speakers embedded in the chair. This is not "John, my studious grandson, with polite manners, tidy room, and careful eating habits". That John is absent, now replaced by a rampant killer, emptying bullets into dark figures lurking in shadows or leaping from doorways, casting grenades across barriers to see bodies torn to bits, moving ever forward to slay as many combatants as possible. If uninterrupted, he may remain in that state for hours. He will sometimes come home early from school because he knows he will have the house to himself and can return to the enchantment of the killing fields. This is the intoxication of a second-order self. All the frustrations, ambiguities, complexities – along with the possible emptiness – of daily life are removed. One lives a thrilling life as a hero with a thousand lives, but returns to the dinner table as a dutiful son. To be sure, this is a dramatized account, and it is clearly more relevant to some forms of participatory games than others.[8] But virtually all competitive games invite one – for whatever amount of time – to become a second-order self.

The increased presence of a second-order being might not be so important in itself. To play tennis or golf once or twice a week probably has little impact on the remainder of one's life. One plays, and when play is terminated, one returns to their everyday demands. However, a closer examination is required. There is now substantial literature in the human sciences – from the late 19th century to the present – proposing that one of the major influences on human development is imitative role-playing. In their play, children imitate their parents, for example, and in playing out these roles their personalities and potentials are shaped. In the same way, when entering a profession, one imitates the behavior of other professionals and attempts to play the role of the professional. What is crucial for the present chapter, is that out of these processes one's sense of self emerges. In being the other, one becomes oneself. Play gives way to a sense of obdurate identity. Consider again the emergence of the playland. As we have seen, activities in social networks invite playing with one's identity, while spectator activities invite the imitation of players and with competitive games, one indeed does become a player. With sustained and intense participation in playland, the conditions are in place for the emergence of a genuine *playing self*. The sense of a second-order self gives way to a first order: "I am a player".[9]

As the sense of the playing self gains strength, the states of the authentic being become more suspect. To create a series of avatars or game identities poses little problem; with chameleon-like ease, one can fit congenially into the game at hand. Within the individualist tradition, with its emphasis on authenticity, one might *choose* to play, depending on the outcome; however,

as a playing self, one is simply playing without asking questions about the outcome. In the same way, one does not choose to breathe the air; breathing is just the nature of life. For the playing self, one who calculates daily decisions about work and play may seem naïve. To fancy oneself as a rational agent, carefully weighing the outcomes of a decision is foolish: "Don't you know it's all a game?" Richard Rorty's (1989) conception of the *liberal ironist* is apt. For Rorty, propositions about the real and the good are without rational foundations. And yet those realizing this is so may nevertheless commit themselves to the good of relieving suffering in the world. They commit themselves to liberal causes understanding full well that there are no knockdown arguments for doing so and no rational grounds for their commitment. In the same way, in taking issues of life seriously, the playing self understands that they are not serious. Or as Oscar Wilde would put it, "Deep down he is superficial".

As the playing self emerges in cultural life, what are the implications for daily life? What is worth doing? On what kind of narrative journey is one embarked? In order to treat such issues we must obviously broaden the realm of interpretive complexity. As commentators we are immersed in the very processes about which we write; we grapple with understanding a condition that is not, for us, an object of observation. The hope, however, is that by grappling with these ideas we generate resources for collectively navigating our way.

With this said, it is my view that with the playing self, the strong individualist account of human functioning recedes. One does not ask, in the abstract, "What would I like to be?" and look inward for the resources to reach this self-determined end. Rather, one recognizes that one is forever functioning within a relational context, with other players, with rules and expectations, and with offerings of what is possible and what is precluded. One may ask about preferred ends within this context, but there is no meta-contextual place to stand. The playing self is relationally dependent. This does not mean confronting a pre-fixed world, where one can only play within the boundaries of tradition. On the contrary, because one understands that one comes into being through play, and that the games are created by players, then new games are always a possibility. All that is required is another player responding enthusiastically to the invitation, "Let's imagine that...".

The life-course for the playing self is thus indeterminate. As Timmermans (2010) proposes, in the digitalized contexts of the game world the vision of a coherent life narrative is no longer compelling. The latter vision is a by-product of a textual world. In effect, the playing self is ideally adapted to

the technologically driven *ethos* in which change is continuous and rapid. Living disjunctively is not, then, unsettling. Rather, the infinite possibility of new and exciting life-games is optimistic and energizing. Does the playing self thus lack moral fiber? Is this just a spineless creature for whom anything goes? I don't think so. Rather, one's existence as a playing self requires the presence of a game, and games require for their existence rules of conduct. These rules, in turn, contain values – what it is to win and lose, to succeed and fail, to play fairly or unfairly. As mentioned earlier, most video games are based on a narrative in which heroes are pitted against villains. Thus a world of virtue is built into both the content and structure of the game. Extrapolating to life outside the game, the playing self would be prone to a *situated ethics*. He or she would be sensitive to local moralities, but would be resistant to transcendent moral principles. This means that because the rules of a game are ultimately arbitrary, and one ultimately plays to win, the situated ethics may run thin. Therefore, bending the rules may be a pervasive temptation.

Relationships in playland

Social history sensitizes us to the shifting character of social relationships across time. In a previous work, for example, I have traced the corrosive effect of 20th century modernism on the romanticist tradition, and explored the new potentials opened by the postmodern cultural turn (Gergen 1992; 2009). What I could not appreciate at the time was the rapid expansion of the ludic mentality. How are we to understand contemporary transformations in relational mores, and how should these be regarded? Again, such questions are without culminating answers, and it is to a sustained dialogue that we must subscribe. To that end, I touch on only two related issues in the present offering: commitment and alienation.

As proposed earlier, the playland ethos does not lend itself to sustaining the individualist tradition of the past, but rather, it sets the context for diffusion and rebirth as a playing self. As also proposed, for the playing self the world is seen through the metaphoric lens of the game. Most important in this context, the vast majority of all games require other players – actual or simulated. In effect, to be a playing self is to exist in a world not as a lone agent, but fundamentally *with* others. And, as players in all competitive games are aware, one does not fully control one's actions. The success or failure of one's behavior is inherently dependent on the behavior of the other (or others). The outcome of any game emerges from the relational process.

At the same time, the relationship between the playing self and others is tenuous. At once, the other is needed (either as a partner in play or a team member), but simultaneously he or she serves as (or can become) an antagonist whose actions can hasten one's defeat (or game death). In business circles – when one's allies in a given field are also one's competitors – one speaks of "frenemies". Thus one may sustain broad regard for one's acquaintances, but they always remain at a distance. Special regard may be expressed toward fellow players – a tennis or golf partner, for example. However, such regard may frequently be context-specific. That is, one may spend many enjoyable hours playing with one's companions, but have little or no interest in seeing them outside these times.[10]

Much the same ambivalence may influence relations that were once defined in terms of depth or commitment: friendships, romantic love, and one's family central among them. Such relations are often viewed as bonding, suggesting that one is no longer a free agent. The playing self may think little of "free agency", but bonded commitment is also alien. To demand a commitment that transcends the boundaries of a particular context would be akin to asking one to serve a tennis ball when seated at the bridge table. In contrast to the modernist, for whom deep relationships smell of an antiquated and saccharine romanticism, the playing self is versatile. He or she can "play at" being the soulmate, a baleful romantic, or the adoring father or mother. And in doing it well, one may achieve great pleasure. However, these are all situated activities – effectively, games of the moment. They are not necessary indicators of cross-time commitments. Ample support for this waning of commitment is found in Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds* (2003). However, where Bauman sees human bonding as a natural desire, I am more inclined to view bonding as a cultural tradition that is more or less valued and practiced depending on historical conditions. In this case, the playing self may feel little anxiety at the deterioration of bonding. Fragility in this case is not a threat, but an opportunity.

Although I move here into more conjectural territory, there is a second and more menacing movement that demands discussion. Ironically, while the playland *zeitgeist* promotes social engagement, there are also ways in which antagonisms are intensified. This groundwork is laid by the agonistic structure of most games, and the way in which the social landscape can so easily be indexed in terms of friends and enemies. With relationships in a tenuous condition, others may easily be thrust into the latter category. Here I was struck by a recent article in the *New York Times* (5/12/10) reporting on the increasing incidence of digital bullying

among young people. They speak of the "cavalier meanness" with which adolescents can treat each other on Facebook or by cell phone texting. Small cliques will gang up on an individual, and bombard him or her with comments like "go cut yourself", "you are sooo ugly", "your pic makes me throw up". Swear words like "bitch", "shit", and "fuck" are also commonplace.[11] What also caught me about this article was the response of a straight-A student to her mother. Her mother had been notified by the school that her daughter had been caught making a MySpace page about her classmate in middle-school calling her a "whore" and pointing to her private parts. The distraught mother rushed to school to find her daughter at the guidance counselor's office, her arms defiantly crossed. The mother pleaded for her daughter to consider the impact of this page on her victim's feelings. "This is a human being... This girl will be destroyed for the rest of her life!" The daughter sullenly replied: "I don't care, It's all true". The weeks following at home were marked by arguments, recriminations, screaming, and slammed doors.

It is this latter schism that particularly concerns me. I find from countless parents that their relationships with their adolescent children are fraught with antagonism. Their admonishments do not yield compliance, or even silent resistance. Rather, a very likely response is a full volley of vituperation, replete with oaths that the parents never once uttered in the company of family. Adolescence in Western culture has long been a difficult period for family relationships. However, we seem to have entered a period of extreme distance and disrespect. In my view, the emergence of playland culture brings with it a broad generational schism. With the early technologies of television, films, radio, and mass publications, the adult population was essentially immersed in spectator pleasure. Competitive play was limited, and the techno-mediated context of play fully absent. However, for two decades now, social and competitive play have radically increased, and the younger generations are the major participants. Electronic games and social networking for pleasure are predominantly activities of the younger generations. As Chatfield (2010) reports, for example, 99% of teenage boys and 94% of teenage girls in the US have played video games. Adolescents are also unlikely to allow their parents access to their Facebook sanctuary (though parents over the age of 30 are not likely to participate in Facebook at all). The result is the emergence of a generation gap in which respect for elders is receding. Not only do the older generations not understand the technology, they have little knowledge or appreciation of the lived worlds of the young. For the older generations, in turn, the young begin to appear both shallow and uncivilized.

Playland and society

These brief explorations into emerging forms of cultural life – focusing on self and relationships – also invite expanded discussion. Again, my concern here is not with the shifts taking place in the way people spend their time and money. More important, in my view, are the broader transformations taking place. In the case of both self-conception and relational patterning, the impact of playland activities is direct. Engagement in play is itself transforming. However, the ripple effects of such activities are of far greater magnitude. Here I call attention to what may be called *metaphoric drift*. By this I mean the way in which the imagery of the game becomes the means by which we understand, enact, and thus transform other forms of life. In the case of games, metaphoric drift is represented, for example, in the way many organizations define their members as a team, or more threateningly, the way in which video games come to resemble war games, and actual war may come to be viewed as play. To illustrate, global combat has now become the basis for the Military Channel on television. The channel features videos on machine guns, special ops, Nazi hunting, snipers, and so on – in effect, reconstituting human slaughter as entertainment. The website for the channel includes, as well, a range of games that parallel the television fare. An iPhone game enables one to "earn a sniper license", another enables one to test their firepower skills. At the same time, over 11 million people worldwide play the video game *World of Warcraft*. The contemporary echoes of "Oh! What a Lovely War" become ominous.

Equally unsettling reverberations accompany the entry of gaming metaphors into economics and politics. In many respects the gaming metaphor has already entered the economic world. Early on, the popular game *Monopoly* sensitized generations to the ludic character of winning and losing money, and economic game theory informed the practices of strategic management. However, in recent years the metaphoric drift has become accentuated. Already by 1994, business executive Jack Stack wrote the popular book *The great game of business*. However, a spate of books has recently emerged showing how the concept and practice of gaming is being instituted within the business world.[12] Games are currently being used, for example, to reach new customers, build brands, recruit and retain employees, and drive innovation. Reeves and Read (2009) propose that game training can provide vital preparation for participating in the contemporary business world. In effect, they wish to use games to change the way people work and do business. Business literally becomes a game.

It is this mentality that many believe informed cultures of finance and banking in their inviting the stock market collapse of 2008-09. Without strict oversight, investment banks such as Goldman Sachs hesitated little to use fraud in rigging the market in their favor. Banks did not hesitate to inflate the housing market, fully understanding that the short-term gains would ultimately lead to disaster. If business is a game for business players, the point is not to benefit the society, but at any cost, to win at business!

The game metaphor had drifted into the political arena long before the emergence of playland. With the establishment of a democracy in which political parties vied for power, the metaphors of the battle and the game were ready at hand. In present times, phrases such as winning and losing the political "race", "playing hardball", "the political game", and "playing politics" have shifted from the domain of metaphor to the literal.[13] Although the play element in American politics was noted in Huizinga's 1938 book, its influence has now become alarming in its proportions. The problem in part is the conflation of the good/evil dichotomy dominating the game tradition with political party differences. Civil debate has been replaced by public acrimony, with the political rhetoric so intensely hostile that it has become associated with deadly assaults. (A recent cover of *The Economist* pictures political debaters with pistols replacing their tongues.) The intense and absorbing contest between mirror images of good and evil also brings about an indifference to the complexities of policy issues. Matters of public good are overlooked and the sole aim becomes defeating one's opponent.

While we are concerned here primarily with cultural deficits, we should not conclude that the playland transformation is altogether negative. Much has been written about the various skills engendered by video and computer game playing, along with the positive uses of games in education and training.[14] However, it is also important to consider the positive potential in terms of broader cultural patterns. For example, games not only generate divisions among people (e.g. my team, political party, my nation vs. your nation), but they can also serve to unite people who would otherwise be apart. People from diverse economic classes, educational backgrounds, and ethnicities unite around a favorite team; players even from the poorest background with sufficient athletic skill can become national idols in a culture; adolescents from around the globe meet together in virtual space to form teams. For every division, there is also inclusion. There is also a way in which the gaming *zeitgeist* can undermine all forms of fundamentalism. As one begins to understand cultural life as made

up of gaming sites (e.g. corporate life as a game, law as a game, science as a game), there is a loosening of belief in any tradition of intelligibility. Rather than understanding statements of what is true, real, or rational as foundationally grounded, they all become rhetorics of reality. This is essentially the view taken by James Carse in his 1986 work, *Finite and infinite games: A vision of life as play and possibility.* When life is viewed in terms of playscripts, then one may be liberated from the grasp of any particular playscript and one can play with the forms of play. This mentality is also reflected in the emerging critique within the cyber-community of the work ethic, the privatization and commodification of information, music, and art, and the decline in economic pursuits as the major goal of life. Among the most potent documents is Pat Kane's *The play ethic: A manifesto for a different way of living* (2004). Here he argues for transforming the world of work, education, and spirituality so that play is at its center. Play takes on an ethical dimension.

In conclusion

In this chapter I propose that a major transformation is taking place in Western culture, one in which play is not only becoming a central activity, but in which play increasingly serves as the organizing metaphor for human activity. This ludification of culture results in part from low-cost communication technologies that make dramatically engaging activities available non-stop to increasing sectors of the population. Participation in games is both vicarious and participatory, and is amplified by the play-like ambience of social network activities. Such a transformation invites attention to the broad ramifications for cultural life. My central concern in this chapter is with the implications for self-conception and social relationships. Here I have outlined the emergence of a playing self, the sense that one is fundamentally a performer within a life of game-like activities. This sense of self places a strong value on relationship, but the value of authentic commitment gives way to temporary pleasure. I have also touched on ways in which the metaphor of play increasingly inhabits the major institutions of society, including government, business, and education. While it is tempting to be critical of such a transformation, such a critique largely reflects on investments in the ontologies and values of pre-game cultural life. This is not to discount such a critique, but to invite a continuous dialogue that also takes into account the positive potential of life in playland.

Notes

1. For a detailed account of the burgeoning of game playing and its commercial success, see Chatfield (2010).
2. Social commentators such as Berger (2002) and Kent (2001) have also made a strong case for a major cultural change on the basis of engagements in computer and video games alone. Wark (2007) sees video games as leading to utopian cultural life.
3. See Sayler's (2006) review.
4. See, for example, Healy (1999), Carr (2010), and Winn (2002).
5. Illustrative are Devlin (2011), McGonigal (2011), and Squire (2011).
6. See, for example, Gergen (1992; 2009).
7. See also Wellman (2001) on networked individualism, and de Lange (2010) on mobile media and playful identities.
8. The reader should consult Bissell's (2010) firsthand account of his own hypnotic immersion in video games.
9. In the Freudian sense neither functions on the reality principle, nor on the pleasure principle, but on an imaginary principle, "what if?". It should also be noted that the phrase "playing self" has also been used in the English translation of Melucci's work *Il gioco dell'io* (1991). However, his use of the term has totally different implications.
10. Contemporary retirement communities in the US are typically built around a complex of golf courses, tennis courts, and swimming pools. It is primarily through games that one becomes a neighbor.
11. As Aboujaoude (2011) cogently argues, the Internet allows one to attack others without having to confront their pain. Moreover, one is free to fantasize aggression without ego-controls that might be enhanced by the presence of others.
12. See, for example, Beck and Wade (2004); Connors and Smith (2011); Edery and Mollick (2010); Reeves and Read (2009); Zicherman and Linder (2010).
13. For extended examples of the metaphor in action see Heileman and Halperin (2009) and Mathews (2010).
14. See, for example, Gee (2005) and Griffiths (2002).

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