

# The delicate illusion of play

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Play is magical because you are either get it and are part of it, or it's just weird.

I suppose I should start with a definition of play, though that would be difficult. It certainly involves a set of rules that people follow. The rules are unnecessary, in the animalistic sense that they're not necessary for survival; we choose them. Play invariably involves a rôle, such as the prosecutor in a courtroom, or the alternating offense/defense rôles in basketball, or the pursuer and pursued in a million other games.

Necessary things have their play aspect as well: we don't just eat food, but turn it into a form of play where we enjoy the part of wine snob or willing coffee addict. The aspects of play and the assumption of rôles in sex and other intergender relations is left as an obvious exercise for the reader.

My favorite citation for all this is of course Huizinga [1971], who points out that even sober institutions central to our society's order infuse play into their work. War is a matter of life and death, and yet is an endless series of customs about killing each other politely. If you're in the UK, ¿why are the judges wearing powdered wigs? If you're in the USA, the attorneys have to rise every time they address the judge. At jury selection, a rapid-fire alternation of *accept the juror* or *respectfully decline*, the attorneys work their knees doing a kind of whack-a-mole manoeuvre, partially rising for half a second, delivering their two or three words, and plopping down again. This is useless; it is play. [It's also a no-brainer to see religious rituals as a set of entirely unnecessary rules from which participants get enjoyment and even fulfilment, but Huizinga didn't touch this, probably for political reasons. Not that it kept him from being persecuted by Nazis.]

Huizinga took pains in his intro to say that even though there is play in central institutions like law, we shouldn't dilute the word *play* by seeing it everywhere. Me, I don't see why not. There are arbitrary customs invented all over the place, throughout all social interactions, and even solitary ones. We take on rôles all day long, even though few are necessary to our survival. Many of our most important sentences that begin with "I am" conclude with some sort of identification through socially-structured activity: I am a fast typist, I am a flight attendant, I am good at talking to people, I am good at picking music.

OK, so play is everywhere, and is central to society. Our self-esteem is defined through play rôles and how well we achieve them. We get enjoyment from following rules we made up for ourselves.

But then there are those outside our rules, who are just walking in on our play, and how they react. Here's a simple exhibit: Look at this Fucking Hipster<sup>1</sup>, a blog—

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<sup>1</sup><http://latfh.com>

and now book—whose sole intent is to display people vibrantly at play to readers who have not at all subscribed to those rules of play. I could list too many similar examples; perhaps I'll also refer you to in entry #252 about another site and leave it at that. Anyway, it's not about hipsters—you can find intolerance in a similar mold regarding any group engaging in anything outside the norm.

It is in fact a central tenet of humor: people doing funny things is not funny; people *watching* people do funny things is funny. It's amusing enough when Lucy and Ethyl are desperately trying to fulfil their rôles as candy boxers, can't keep up, and start shoving chocolates in their mouths. But when the boss walks in and sees the extent to which Lucy is trying so hard to conform to invented rules, the absurdity of the situation becomes evident. There is a person, like any other, but with her mouth overflowing with bon bons. You'll see it in your sitcoms every time: an absurd situation starts up, and then an outsider walks in. Pause for laughter.

After the spell of play is broken, the players are immediately thrown into a new form of play, where there is an observer and observed, and if the observer chooses to take on his or her position with enthusiasm, a judge and the judged. In fact, why wait to walk in on somebody doing something weird when play is in everything everybody does? You could just walk around the block, find somebody to call out on engaging in play, and enjoy your new position. The difference is that the first form of play, where the hipster dresses up in spandex, is voluntary and the hipster accepts the form of play and his rôle in it; the new form is involuntary and benefits only the observer. Look at this Fucking Hipster is a fundamentally demeaning form of play.

In the comedies, being caught engaging in arbitrary play isn't defusing, because that would kill the show's pacing, but it typically is here in the real world. I mean, imagine Lucy's true reaction: wow, why *do* I do all this to myself? Why didn't I drop my rôle when it became impossible and just walk away, instead of diving deeper into it? Is this wage really so important? The hipster in his cape, forced to acknowledge that this is all arbitrary, pointless, and yet enjoyable, is now forced to ask why he enjoys it. The answer is probably not very flattering. He gives up on wearing capes, and comes up with some other arbitrary form of play—book reader, macramé weaver, tv watcher—and soon realizes that that too is arbitrary.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, somebody is asking the author of Look at this Fucking Hipster why he blogs, and he has no real answer. After all, intolerance is its own form of arbitrarily chosen play.

## References

Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens*. Beacon Press, 1971.