

REVIEW ESSAY

Early Modern Play: Three Perspectives

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LET US DRAW on the past as we look toward the future. Specifically, let us begin with the *Propositiones ad acuendos juvenes*, or “Problems to Sharpen the Young,” by Alcuin of York. Written sometime in the later eighth century, this text offers a number of logical and mathematical problems meant, as the title suggests, to refine one’s intellect. Some of the problems are fairly straightforward, as in the case of a question about how many sheep might fit in a field measuring 200×100 feet, with each sheep being allocated a space of 5×4 feet. Others, like *de porcis*, are somewhat trickier. This latter example is an impossible puzzle that asks how one might slaughter 300 pigs in three days by only slaughtering an odd number on each of the days.¹ One even finds a few modern standards, such as the wolf-goat-cabbage problem: “A man had to take a wolf, a goat and a bunch of cabbages across a river. The only boat he could find could only take two of them at a time. But he had been ordered to transfer all of these to the other side in good condition. How could this be done[?]”² *Propositiones ad acuendos juvenes* may not be Alcuin’s most august work, but it might just prove one of his most valuable for the scholar interested in play, for that scholar faces a deceptively complex set of intellectual and pedagogical problems.

Gone are the days of Harold J. R. Murray toiling away in relative obscurity to produce an exhaustive history of chess for a handful of diehard enthusiasts. The historian of early modern play now faces a rapidly expanding cohort of like-minded scholars, in addition to a growing wealth of venues for publication, as what had once been a marginal topic comes more fully into its own. We see more and more articles in leading journals, and dedicated studies have begun to appear with greater and greater frequency. Early interventions by Philippe Ariès and

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¹ Alcuin of York, 121–22.

² *Ibid.*, 112.

Jean-Claude Margolin (as well as the contributors to *Passare il tempo*) now stand alongside more recent edited volumes. In addition, various new venues have arisen to address the topic; these include the broadly engaged, such as the *International Journal of Play*, as well as the topically and historically more specific—most notably the *Journal of Board Game Studies* and *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*. As a result of such work, early modern playthings, games, and the like now crop up seemingly everywhere, from the inventory of Gargantua's postprandial diversions to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's wily *Children's Games*, and from courtesy manuals to vernacular song. Not that such historical objects and texts and activities have suddenly come into existence. Rather, they have become visible in ways they tended not to be thirty or forty years ago. We have, it seems, finally decided that play is valuable.

But to decide that play is valuable is not necessarily to agree about what play is or where its value might reside. Are the children in Bruegel's painting truly at play? What of the adults who viewed this painting upon its completion? Were their dinner conversations about it pure *otium*, or might *negotium* have conceivably found its way into the room? If it could have done, how might we categorize the resulting exchanges? And anyway, who cares about the answers to these questions, and why? Murray rightly presumed in 1913 that there was little need to explain why one might want to read the history of a single board game running to nearly 1,000 pages. He could count on an audience already in tune with his own sentiments. The contemporary scholar, by contrast, makes such assumptions at her peril, even when the study of play seems to have the wind at its back.

The current shift in resources, administrative interest, and the public imagination toward the ludic will have—is having—a significant impact. But the likely nature of that impact remains unclear, for not everything one might call a game is necessarily a game, and not everything one might call something else is always something else. Think, for instance, of Annemarieke Willemsen's suggestion that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Netherlandish miniature metal liturgical instruments might have served at least partly, but also perhaps only partly, as playsets. Think, too, of the very ambiguity of the word *toy*, as discussed by Hazel Forsyth. Early modern play was mutable, an unstable category that had come under new scrutiny. Indeed, as Peter Burke and Alessandro Arcangeli have each demonstrated, early modern Europe lived through a sea change in how people conceived of *otium* and *negotium*, with all the eccentricities that such a change might entail. To the challenge of an ambiguous archive, though, we must also add contemporary uncertainty. We find ourselves in the midst of what appears to be similarly momentous transformation, with the ground seeming to shift constantly under our feet. Consequently, as interest in the ludic has expanded, so the need has increased for scholars of play to make the character and signifi-

cance of their topic more broadly legible. And to do that, we really ought to develop a robust conceptual framework for our research.

With that in mind, I offer three main theoretical models that can help us participate in the shaping of play as a higher-profile topic of study. The first of these comes from Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo ludens: Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur* (*Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*) remains a touchstone for contemporary scholarship. The second comes from Bernard Suits, whose book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* deserves a more prominent place in the academic landscape. And the third comes from Eugen Fink, especially his landmark studies, “Oase des Glücks” (“Oasis of Happiness”) and *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (*Play as Symbol of the World*), which have recently been translated into English.

Each of these three models has its strengths, but each also has its weaknesses. Huizinga’s model of play calls our attention to a diet of topics that is excitingly diverse and far-reaching. However, it does so with a catch. This diet results from an intuition that the ludic might underlie all social and cultural dynamics, rather than merely comprising a subset of them. Consequently, although attuned to the joys, the miseries, and above all the expansive complexities of play, that rather caprine approach does not always discriminate between various activities so clearly as one might wish. By contrast, Suits’s model seems positively lupine in its selectivity, since it admits only a narrow range of topics, practices, behaviors, and objects. To be sure, it is a bit more eccentric in its tastes, and at times more ravenous, than one might expect. Nonetheless, it risks ignoring certain opportunities due to its strict logical constraints, especially its preoccupation with games, narrowly defined, rather than with play in general. And finally, the great benefit of Fink’s work lies in its almost cruciferous potential to fortify the soul by attending to the epistemological implications of play. Nonetheless, his model also risks lapsing into ahistorical abstraction (this despite its admirable recognition of play’s phenomenological weight). Let us therefore address each of these three in turn before trying to decide how one might choose among them.

Most readers are probably familiar with the analytical framework that *Homo ludens* laid out. Play, Huizinga argued, is a voluntary activity; one cannot engage in it compulsorily. It also is nonutilitarian, and its consequent immunity to questions of application, morality, and the like is what lends it vitality. Play occurs in special places, uses dedicated rules, and frequently employs special markers such as uniforms or approved instruments. Last, but not least, it requires definitive endings, since all truly voluntary activities will necessarily conclude. As for the forms play might take, Huizinga offered two: mimicry and competition, both of which he treated as more than mere diversions. Indeed, he famously declared in his study that “all play [*elk spel*] expresses something.”³

³ Huizinga, 28. All translations from this text and from the text by Pacioli are my own.

What Huizinga had in mind was a far cry from what usually passes as representation or signification. *Homo ludens* was, at heart, an attempt to demonstrate that play was an underlying principle governing virtually every human endeavor, rather than just a vast array of frivolous activities. “For a long time now,” Huizinga wrote, “I have become increasingly certain that human civilization arises and unfolds in play, as play.”⁴ Note that double doubling: the ludic might always “express something,” but it never did so in a purely transitive manner. For culture to arise in and as play, to unfold in and as play meant that the ludic was not merely diverse in its manifestations but also self-sufficient. Instead of serving something larger or more substantive or more meaningful, play constituted meaning in its own right. It “expressed” something in a manner similar to the way a disease does: by means of instantiation, rather than through reference to something conceptually adjacent. Hence Huizinga’s resistance to psychoanalytical approaches to the topic, which struck him as reductive.

The multifariousness of play provides evidence in favor of Huizinga’s basic point. Were ludic endeavors purely transitive, there would be no need for so diverse an array of pursuits. We would all play water polo, and that would be that. Instead, we play innumerable games, and variations on those games, because each is in some way necessary. That necessity may result partly from a compulsion to test cultural norms, as Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning argued. No less often, though, the diversity and sheer inventiveness of play seem to be, and to have been, driven by other needs and desires. But what are those needs? How might we identify and describe those desires?

Here we come to the crux of the problem for the historian of play: Huizinga provides us with such a readily accessible set of characteristics that it seems foolish not to use them, but those characteristics come at a cost. Above all, the purpose to which he put them can be maddeningly vague, as in the case of his discussion of religion. Liturgy, meditation, and the like were not strictly examples of play, and yet they did not so much abut on the latter phenomenon as derive from and exist within it. Of sanctuaries, for instance, he declared that since “there is no formal difference between a game and a sacred activity—that is to say, sacred activity takes the same forms as a game—so too is the sacred site indistinguishable from a play-space [*spelruimte*].”⁵ Virtually any space could evolve through and be defined by play, even when the activities that take place there might themselves not strictly be play. The ludic was inherently penumbral for Huizinga, and it thrived on a concomitant blurring of boundaries, roles, and thus worlds (play versus serious): “one is, whether magician or enchanted, simultaneously knowing and duped.”⁶ It is perhaps understandable, then, that so

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

many of us distill from *Homo ludens* its descriptive tools and set aside the more problematic aspects of its author's argument, aspects documented especially sensitively by Robert Anchor and Ernst Gombrich. But to employ those tools without bearing in mind their original purpose is to risk becoming a living garbage can. We need more rigor and logical consistency to help us meet our cultural and historical obligations.

Without discrimination, one cannot establish boundaries for play; without boundaries, play cannot exist. And yet, play so consistently tests those boundaries that Ludwig Wittgenstein himself declared regarding board games and the like that, "if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that."⁷ Taking this statement as a challenge, Bernard Suits wrote *The Grasshopper* to advance a common set of characteristics with which to identify games and, in so doing, a means to delineate one set of boundaries and purposes within the larger category of play. Recognizing the futility of trying to circumscribe play in all its diversity, Suits treated games and the objects associated with them as participating in a larger intellectual dynamic, rather than as being the final cause of that dynamic. This enabled him to differentiate proper games, such as footraces, from cosmetically similar activities, such as ring-around-the-rosy ("a kind of dance to vocal accompaniment, or a choreographed song"⁸). In so doing, he produced a concise and admirably firm foundation for addressing play in general, since games provided one of the least ambiguous instances of such "autotelic activities."⁹

Suits identified three conditions that are necessary and sufficient for any activity to be classified as a game. First, every game must have what he called a pre-lusory goal that brings players together. Second, every game must be subject to a set of constitutive rules that are designed to standardize the means players might employ, as well as to ensure a degree of inefficiency in the pursuit of that goal. Third, all games require that players adopt a lusory attitude, i.e., participants must recognize and accept the rules governing their performance. If my colleagues and I decide to visit a local bar, that might constitute a kind of play, insofar as it could be an autotelic activity, but our trip would not be a game. Imagine, however, that we developed a set of rules (crab-walking, not treading on cracks in the pavement, and only making right turns along the way) to which we all agreed to subscribe. Then, and only then, would our trip meet Suits's criteria. Armed with those criteria, the thoughtful scholar should be able to identify a reasonably clear set of activities and objects to discuss.

Although play was penumbral for Huizinga, in *Homo ludens* it nonetheless always seems on the verge of differing from seriousness in some absolute way.

⁷ Wittgenstein, §66.

⁸ Suits, 200.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

Suits took a different approach. Such a distinction obtains, he suggested, but it is entirely arbitrary. According to the *The Grasshopper*, that distinction exists solely in order to create value. A life of all play, no less than one of all work, makes for a poor existence because people thrive on having a sense of purpose, however vague it may be. Thus, long ago, “the Strivers and the Seekers [came] to the conclusion that if their lives were merely games, then those lives were scarcely worth living.”¹⁰ For Suits, *negotium* preserves *otium*, rather than the other way around: people invent seriousness in order shore up their sense of purpose and, thereby, preserve the value of the nonserious. This is one of the most important points in *The Grasshopper* for historians, since it suggests that play is, ultimately, a kind of signaling game given over to boundary setting and acknowledgment. That is to say, play revolves to a considerable extent around interpretive congruence, the shared alignment (or misalignment) of worlds, ludic or otherwise. As a result, Suits’s model offers a satisfyingly economical, localized, and above all logically consistent argument that boasts considerable analytical potential. Unfortunately, it also is quite narrow in its applicability—so much so, that to rely exclusively on it is to risk malnourishment.

This is where the work of Eugen Fink comes in handy. Having studied with both Heidegger and Husserl, Fink was at pains to address the problem of boundaries—between play and seriousness, between play world and actual world, etc.—without lapsing into the argument of transitive value. As for the title of his magnum opus, the “symbol” Fink had in mind is not a signifier in any conventional sense of the term. On the contrary, “so long as we suppose play to be derivative appearance, to be mirroring, and suppose mirroring to be a reproduction of archetypical things in residual silhouettes, we are all held under the spell of the Platonic interpretation. We must free ourselves from this spell.”¹¹ Simple oppositions and contrasts, he suggested, cloud rather than clarify our understanding of the ludic. Indeed, the establishment of such binaries can blind us to an interdependence that shares important points of contact with the paradox of definition that Suits observed. As Fink noted in “Oasis of Happiness,” “if one defines play . . . only in opposition to work, actuality, seriousness, and genuineness, one merely places it, falsely, *next to* other phenomena of life. Play is a fundamental phenomenon of existence . . . but it is *not* directed, as with the other fundamental phenomena, by a collective striving for the final purpose. It stands *over and against* them, as it were, in order to assimilate them to itself by portraying them. We play seriousness, play genuineness, play actuality, we play work and struggle, play love and death. And we even play play.”¹² This deeply

¹⁰ Ibid., 195.

¹¹ Fink, 88.

¹² Ibid., 21 (italics in original).

phenomenological approach to ludic pursuits suggests that they arise within the world, thereby re-creating the world as object, yet in so doing those pursuits do not merely redescribe appearances, aspirations, or exigencies. Rather, they constitute irruptions within the world that temporarily recast the world itself as an object of inquiry. In such moments, play constitutes embodied understanding by virtue of the boundaries it constructs and then interrogates.

Fink's use of the phrase "over and against" is particularly noteworthy. As the play world renders aspects of the actual world comprehensible, so does playfulness render seriousness comprehensible, as he went on to argue in *Play as Symbol of the World*: "The activities that have a shade of the seriousness of life count for us as serious activity, as an activity that 'makes sense' and is imbricated in the highest sense of existence. However, a non-serious activity stands over and against such serious activity, a non-serious activity that does not receive its sense from the architectonically structured total configuration of human goals but rather appears to a certain degree to be 'senseless.'" ¹³ However epistemologically suspect it may be when taken as fact, the demarcation of special realms, rules, and practices is crucial, insofar as all bear on their supposed counterparts. Significance lies in contrast, which takes the form of regulatory effort: "That playing as playing is an actual, real enactment of life, that it occurs amid and among the serious activities of life, no one would contest—but the actuality of playing is determined as such precisely by the fundamental character of a non-serious acting-as-if. . . . The non-seriousness of play frequently consists in precisely the illusionary imitation of serious life." ¹⁴

Even triviality becomes part of this regulatory effort: "In its zone of non-actuality play repeats 'serious life'—but takes all burdensome weight away from it, raises compulsory life, so to speak, into the light, floating ether of the 'non-binding.'" ¹⁵ But that triviality is, in truth, illusory. We might find what Fink called an "oasis of happiness" in play, but not because it constitutes a break from things of supposedly higher importance. Rather, our delight in the ludic stems, he suggested, from the ability of play to render existence tolerable by allowing one to make some sense of being in the world. Regulation is all, with torment in the terms and in the intervals a measure of ease. It is an appealing argument in the abstract, and yet one comes away wondering how it might bear on specific historical cases.

Each of these three models—that of Huizinga, that of Suits, and that of Fink—has its merits as well as its drawbacks, which is why I suspect we probably need all three in order to advance the study of play both rigorously and sensitively. In or-

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

der to demonstrate this point, let us turn to *De Viribus Quantitatis* (On the powers of numbers), which the polymath Luca Pacioli seems to have dictated to an amanuensis around 1500. This text comprises over 200 problems of various sorts, a significant number of which express mathematical or mechanical principles. The first section of the book, for instance, lays out roughly 130 numerical problems, algebraic demonstrations, and logic challenges. It also includes a cluster of mechanical puzzles, which demonstrate how tricky it can be to study ludic pursuits.

Most scholars would not group *De Viribus Quantitatis* under the heading of play, and with good reason. Pacioli did not address leisure in any contemporaneous sense of the term. Rather, he laid out this text as a pedagogical guide, a means for preparing boys for the demands of adult life. He repeatedly addresses his reader in ways that indicate the presumption that this person will be teaching. He talks about youths (*giovinetti*) as the ultimate audience for the book's subject matter, and for especially difficult topics he gives the reader advice on how best to present them. And yet, my inner goat tells me that *De Viribus Quantitatis* is also redolent of something other than *negotium*, something closer to what Burke identified as *ozio onesto*, or an acceptable sort of pastime, even as it avers the potential utility of its contents.¹⁶ For instance, Pacioli's introductory remarks concerning a disentanglement puzzle now known as the Victoria point out that "some operations, which are extremely insightful [*quali sonno de grande speculatione*], are done to give delight to the group."¹⁷ Still, while statements of this sort carve out a space for something other than adult industriousness with that specification of delight, the goat should not settle in too comfortably. Delight is not uniformly welcome; only some operations are meant to provide it.

As this last point might imply, we need not worry about nutritional content. *De Viribus Quantitatis* is more than capable of providing sustenance. Note Pacioli's use of *speculatione*. As Jeffrey Hamburger has noted with respect to medieval and early modern religious practice, "speculation insists on the interconnectedness of things, the way in which all Creation can be read as a mirror reflecting its Creator and in which man, in turn, can find in nature and sensory experience a spur to his salvation."¹⁸ *De Viribus Quantitatis* did not offer its readers or their pupils an eschatological model, but it did depend on the idea that sensory experience both conveyed and, to some extent, constituted comprehension. To encounter the Victoria puzzle was, for Pacioli, an opportunity to encounter and internalize immutable laws of creation; that was what made it

¹⁶ Burke, esp. 143–44.

¹⁷ Pacioli, 282: "Sonno alcune operationi facte per dar dilecto alla brigata, quali sonno de grande speculatione."

¹⁸ Hamburger, 359.

valuable as a teaching tool. What is more, the matter at hand was not instruction and delight, but rather instruction in delight, and vice versa. Pacioli's copy of the Victoria puzzle served not simply as a vehicle for something conceptually adjacent, but also as that something in its own right.

But is it reasonable to talk about such challenges as if they were games and, thus, examples of play, ca. 1500? Although Pacioli used a number of terms to describe the puzzles he had chosen, none of those terms belong to the language of leisure; quite the contrary, in fact. Here is where a more lupine approach to the past—selective, but still hungry—can help. Pacioli's puzzles all involve specific tasks, such as liberating a piece of wood from a loop of string or freeing a bar from a set of linked rings. That is to say, *De Viribus Quantitatis* sets goals that could be prelusory, or exist outside the confines of a game. But the text also provides rules, of a sort, for how to introduce these puzzles in a pedagogical setting. For instance, Pacioli suggests that students need more than merely to be told about the phenomena they are studying; they should experience those phenomena, fiddle with the objects under consideration. Regarding a challenge now called the Chinese Rings, he suggests that one should minimize verbal explanation and maximize physical engagement with that puzzle, “not just describing the method, but actually showing it.” This is so because “with effort a youth will apprehend it.”¹⁹ The result is a degree of inefficiency, both for the student and for his instructor. Telling someone the solution to this puzzle would undeniably have been less bothersome than watching that person correct his various failures en route to a solution. But however efficient explanation might have been for the instructor, it deprived the student of the opportunity to address his own presumptions and oversights in an attempt to experience firsthand the measure, and number, and weight of creation.

As for the lusory attitude, consider Pacioli's attempt to promote difficulty by asking that his reader not disclose the solutions to certain problems. Having explained the mechanics of what we now call the Solomon's Seal puzzle, he declares that “the preceding explanation should be concealed so that they [youths] do not easily learn the constants [i.e., the rules governing the puzzle], because the thing is more beautiful the more it is hidden; revealed, it does not delight.”²⁰ Both pupil and instructor are involved in a game, the rules of which militate against strict efficiency, in the sense of completing a given mechanical task. One of them must necessarily struggle, the other must necessarily allow him to do so, and both must agree to this arrangement.

¹⁹ Pacioli, 292: “e così successive, de mano in mano mettarai li altri, et parcas lector, perché non solo a scrivere el modo, ma actu mostrandolo, con fatica el giovine lo aprende.”

²⁰ Ibid., 284: “ma el precedente con questo se vogliono far coperti acio li costanti facilmente non aprendano peroché la cosa tanto sia bella quanto sia occulta divulgata non dilecta.”

To reiterate, nowhere did Pacioli refer to the Chinese Rings or the Victoria or Solomon's Seal as puzzles or games, let alone leisure or play. And yet, his defense of *dilecto*, his cautionary aside about difficulty, and his careful instructions for how not to give away answers all suggest an awareness that his pedagogical project lived in the shadows between *otium* and *negotium*. This inherently penumbral character makes play not only vibrant but also evanescent, and that evanescence is part of what makes it such a rich topic for study. But that evanescence also necessitates approaching the topic with a rigorous conceptual framework. Do otherwise, and we risk validating the opportunistic contemporary claim that no meaningful distinction exists among games, play, and the activities that intertwine with them. As Ian Bogost has noted with respect to the business world, that claim is both untenable and irresponsible. One need not be Bertrand Russell to understand that regulation is all, that without terms we endure boundless torment, and that without intervals we forgo all ease. The historian has an obligation to help remind us of this, but she can do so only if she has the right tools. She needs Huizinga (and his followers, such as Roger Caillois) to help her root around in the penumbra; she needs Suits to keep her focused; and she needs Fink to ensure that her analytical aims do not completely drain the topic of its nutritional value.

In conclusion: the scholar of play is akin to someone trying to cross a river with a goat, a wolf, and a cabbage in tow. She has access to a boat, but the SS *Written Word* is only big enough to carry her plus one of her companions at a time. She must take all three to the far shore, but she also must organize her trip carefully. If she concentrates exclusively on the cabbage, the wolf will eat her goat; if she fixates on the wolf, the goat will eat her cabbage; etc. What should she do?

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