

**Playing and the affective time-spaces of a  
Bristol primary school**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper I have two objectives. The first is to critically explore definitions of playing that have underpinned a great deal of research in children's geography. In so doing I want to highlight some of the assumptions that various authors within geography have made (often implicitly) about the ontological status of playing. This will in turn, lead me to work with, between and sometimes against three authors who have tried to theorize playing. In following this route, I hope to come to some tentative conclusions about the status of playing, which paradoxically will eschew any (strong) ontological commitment at all. This leads to my second objective, which is to explore four particular aspects of playing – embodiment, affect, objects and time-space – to examine how they are interleaved with spaces and spacing. In necessarily situating this work within my research at Hilltop Primary School [1] in the summer of 2001, I hope to show that geographical studies can contribute to definitions of playing as much as playing can inflect certain notions of space.*

*Keywords: playing, school, affect, embodiment, time-space, non-representational theory.*

## **Child's Play?**

In thinking about children and playing, it was a while before I realized that the two terms seem to coagulate together, and this seemed to happen without much comment. For instance, the first thing you see when picking up a copy of *children's geographies* (Holloway & Valentine, 2000) is children playing on the cover. Many authors have contributed to the establishment of this link through the very focus of their studies. This includes a number of articles which have been concerned with the provision and use of (often outdoor) play facilities, (see Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Built Environment, 1999). Other studies, closely aligned with my own research here, have explored the actual practices of playing

in after-school clubs (Smith & Barker, 2000), public playgrounds (Gagen, 2000), commercial leisure spaces (McKendrick et al, 2000) and third world rural contexts (Punch, 2000). Indeed, my own research and this paper were based upon and continue to reinforce this subtle connection between playing and childhood.

This common move to link playing and childhood contains a number of tacit agreements, which I would like to bring into the foreground. Firstly it presupposes the connection between playing and childhood to be self evident, which is to say, there is something called 'child's play', often thought of as separate from the ludic activity of adults. James et al (1998) suggest that 'the culture of childhood might be seen in the linguistic and playgrounds games of children, a collective culture, enduring and separated off from the adult world' (p.99). I believe that the self-evidence of this connection is something that could usefully be investigated and challenged, and part of my focus here will be to gesture towards ways in which this might be done. My working hypothesis will be that certain statements about playing should be applicable to all people, rather than just limited to young people. It is therefore crucial to my mind that any theorization of playing, such as the one I hope to elaborate in this paper, must account for an activity which is done by people of all ages. Such an argument seeks to obliquely engage with recent work in children's geography, which has been debating the differences and connections between adults and children (Philo, 2003; Jones, 2003), and the blurred boundary between adulthood and childhood (Valentine, 2003).

The second tacit agreement that underpins the studies mentioned earlier, is that play is talked about only in so far as it has the potential to be liberating, usually in respect to children's use of space. For example, Smith & Barker (2000) recount how children negotiate play activities at an after-school club in order to re-gain some degree of control over that particular aspect of their lives. In a similar vein, Punch (2000) explores how children in rural Bolivia 'create their own playspaces away from parental control' (p.56). McKendrick et al (2000) interpret the growth of commercial play spaces as asserting 'children's right to play space in parts of the built environment which were hitherto perceived as almost exclusively adult domains' (p.101). Aitken (2001) uses play to elaborate upon children's rights to justice and a politics of difference. My argument here is that although playing (often when it resists commercialization), can be key to young people's abilities to secure rights to and control over space, this is only telling half the story. As we see in Gagen's (2000) study of gender normalization in 19<sup>th</sup> century American playgrounds, playing was not, and is not, separate from sedimented regimes of power-discourse. Or put another way, playing isn't all fun and games.

To extend this point further, my third observation on the coalescence of childhood and playing is that authors who have written about playing, to varying degrees, assume that their readers know what playing is. Indeed, it almost seems stupid to raise this question. After all, we all *know* what playing is ... don't we? It is this assumption, key to many if not all studies of play, that I particularly

want to work on in order to disrupt a little the processes by which playing is quietly becoming packaged in the ways described in the previous paragraph. In order to enact this disruption, I begin by exploring three approaches, each of which offers a different way – through psychoanalysis, discourse analysis and performance studies - of defining play. Using the various insights of these three approaches, I wish to theorize certain aspects of play more fully, in order to upset certain assumptions about playing.

### **Transition Play**

The first approach I wish to address is the work of psychoanalyst and psychotherapist Donald Winnicott (1971), which has greatly influenced the work of Stuart Aitken, the author who has done most to explore playing within (children's) geography. Winnicott, like myself, is concerned with 'the lack of a useful statement on the subject of play' (1971, p.39). The appeal of his work (particularly to geographers) as he attempts to address precisely this concern, is the way in which he explicitly links playing with space. Simply put, 'playing has a place and a time' (p.41; original emphasis). The context of Winnicott's study is his work in psychotherapy, and he uses play specifically in order to elucidate his notion of transitional space, where a child develops a sense of self/other through playing. I should state clearly that my focus here is not on the broader arguments made by Winnicott. I am only interested in those parts of his work, which either directly or indirectly provide the basis or support for his definition of play. To this

end, I read Winnicott as making three other useful statements about what play is, in addition to situating it in time and space. Firstly, he foregrounds the role and importance of objects and object relations in playing performances. '[P]lay ... is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' (p.50). Secondly, he calls attention to the creative role that playing can fulfill, or in his words, 'playing is an experience, always a creative experience' (p.50). Finally, he acknowledges the practical extent of playing, or in his words the fact that 'playing is doing' (p.41) Amanda Bingley (2003) provides one example of the way in which these ideas can be used, in her case to explore the relationship between landscape and self.

However, despite critically accentuating context, objects, creativity and the practice of playing, there are some limitations to Winnicott's work when trying to define playing. His definition of playing is often restrictive, such that in suggesting that playing is doing, Winnicott contrasts this 'doing' with thinking and wishing, which is to say that he does not consider things such as day-dreaming as a form of play. He also maintains that playing is *always* creative, where creativity is defined as an ability to shape external reality rather than be subjected to it. Subsequent work by Judith Butler, refracted through Gagen's (2000) study of American playgrounds, has shown that playing can be as much a process for subjection as for creativity, to use Winnicott's own terms. Finally, although accentuating the role of objects, Winnicott's is still unwilling to cede any agency to objects themselves. As Kingsbury (2003) shows with the example of a couch

acting in the capacity of a mother and pillows which stand for breasts, objects only achieve agency on an Imaginary level, rather than being treated as agents in their own right, i.e. pillows acting in their capacity as pillows (c.f. Latour, 1993).

Underlying all of these criticisms, there is perhaps a more significant problem with the theory of play we encounter in Winnicott's scholarship. His definition becomes too bounded by his context, which is to say, his work provides a definition of playing as developmental. Winnicott's focus of course, is entirely practical, and his use of play is secondary to its uses in psychotherapy. However, in *Playing and Reality*, Winnicott suggests that 'there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences' (1971, p.40). Playing is explicitly defined as a developmental activity, whether done by children or adults. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) terms this a rhetoric of play-as-progress. Playing is conceptualized as an activity which helps people grow intellectually, and/or develop a sense of self. Winnicott's definition of playing, implicitly defines children and adults in psychotherapy as less-than-adult, a definition geographers have been keen to move beyond (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). When faced with the challenge of articulating what playing might look like in a non-therapeutic environment, Winnicott's response, literally 'whatever I say about children playing really applies to adults as well' (p.40), deflects, rather than answers the question.

Let me pause for a moment to clarify my argument. I am not arguing that playing is not an important part of the development process (to the extent that we are always 'developing' and this is understood in a non-teleological manner much more akin to emergence) [2]. However, I am suggesting that definitions of playing cannot be reduced to processes of development which are *effects* of certain forms of playing, (and not playing itself). Perhaps Brian Sutton-Smith expresses this idea more eloquently when he says

A play theory of any comprehensiveness must grasp this strange companionship of the very young and the very old, the first waiting to begin and the second to finish; ... and such a theory must account also for the invigorated play of soldiers waiting for battle, or the intensive play of Boccaccio's youthful fourteenth century folk attempting to outlast the Black Plague. In all these cases play seems to have more to do with waiting than with preparing, more to do with boredom than with rehearsal, more to do with keeping up one's spirits than with depression (1997, p.48).

With these criticisms in mind, I wish to turn now to Stuart Aitken's work to examine how he has incorporated Winnicott's insights. Aitken is keen to explore the potential for playing to transform the relations of social reproduction, and is careful to jettison much of the developmental rhetoric that surrounds Winnicott's definition of play. For Aitken only certain forms of playing have the potential to enact this social transformation. He suggests that 'play ... does not fit well in the



rational, instrumental logic that pervades the abstract conceived spaces of today's world' (p.180) [3]. Hence, '[P]lay, at its most radical and important, is as a form of resistance' (2001, p.180). This ideal type of play, according to Aitken, is both non-commercial and done in private (thick play). This leads to his claim that 'giving young people space is more than giving them room to play, it is giving them the opportunity for unchallenged and critical reflection on experiences' (p.180). While, as Thomas (2002) opines, it may be difficult to locate such private spaces for play, Aitken effectively highlights the critical and ethical potential of play. In this scenario, play is most clearly defined as 'the active exploration of individual and social imaginaries, built up in the spaces of everyday life' (p.176). However, I want to suggest that many playing performances have far more contingent and diverse contexts and outcomes. This is not to work against the tenor of Aitken's work, but to suggest that there are many other avenues which might be traveled. Hence, in trying to disrupt this conceptual ghettoization of playing a little, I turn now to the work of play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), which has also tried to account for many different approaches to play.

### **Rhetorics of Play**

Sutton-Smith's book, *The Ambiguity of Play*, is based on the premise that 'when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is ... there is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity' (1997, p.1). Therefore, rather than beginning with a definition of play, Sutton-Smith adopts a more genealogical

approach by proceeding to examine several different rhetorics of play, the culturally situated discourses that underlie different theories of play. In his third chapter he turns his attentions to the rhetoric of child's play as progress, exemplified in Winnicott's work. However, his prognosis is bleak. While never rejecting the play-as-progress discourse outright, Sutton-Smith states that 'evidence does not seem to support very clear causal relationships' (1997, p.42) between playing and development, where correlation is often mistaken for causation. He then goes on to suggest that 'the progress rhetoric appears to serve adult needs rather than the needs of children' (Ibid), by facilitating adults' intervention and manipulation of children's (playful) lives.

Sutton-Smith also explores two other discourses of play specifically in relation to children. The first of these investigations examines power and identity in the play of children, and he suggests that

The adult public transcript is to make children progress, the adult private transcript is to deny their sexual and aggressive impulses; the child public transcript is to be successful as family members and schoolchildren, and their private or hidden transcript is their play life, in which they can express both their special identity and their resentment at being a captive population (1997, p.123).

However, while some playing performances are a result of this 'resentment', the link between playing and some authentic, special or private identity ignores the extent to which playing is part of everyday life, and not some discrete block of experience. That is another way of saying that identities are not fixed, and nor is there some core or 'special' identity, which certain (playing) practices can produce outside relations of power (c.f. Aitken, 2001).

Sutton-Smith also examines the phantasmagorical rhetoric of playing, which explores the potential of imaginary play by children. This chapter offers a number of important nuances for theorizing playing, not least that playing has the potential to be both rational and/or irrational. Sutton-Smith also points out that 'the adult imaginary rhetoric when applied to children tends to overemphasize the creative and innovative qualities of their play at the expense of both the contraries, the phantasmagorical and the ritualistic' (p.171). His point is that playing is 'rooted in ritual as much as in innovation' (Ibid. c.f. Gagen, 2000), and that this applies as much for adult play as it does for child's play.

Once Sutton-Smith has covered the different rhetorics of play, he (re)turns his attentions in a final chapter that is somewhat at odds with the rest of the book, to articulating a definition of play (again) which incorporates all of these rhetorics. His clearest and most unequivocal statement defines 'play as a facsimilization of the struggle for survival', where 'the primary motive of the players is the stylized performance of existential themes that mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks

of survival' (1997, p.231). In this conclusion, not only is his account biologically deterministic, but, as he himself admits, 'despite my extensive criticism of the rhetoric of progress, I have now invented yet another form of it' (Ibid). While being a very useful theoretical resource for anyone interested in playing, Sutton-Smith's book in the end fails to provide a more nuanced theory of playing than those he writes about and critiques. Perhaps the primary reason for this is that his study begins with discourse, ignoring the fact that playing is, irreducibly, a practice. It is these lived, experiential aspects of play that are constantly exceeding the confines of discourse, which finds no real place in his thesis. However, it is precisely this aspect that we have to address, if we are to nuance our understandings and discussions of playing, and so I turn now to a third approach to defining play.

### **Playing Performances**

As any person who plays knows, there is always part of that practice which cannot be described directly. Something elusive, embodied at both a physical and emotional level. While the task of writing about that which exceeds representation may at first seem impossible, the discipline of Performance Studies, with its focus on embodiment and emotion can provide valuable theoretical resources for incorporating practices into our accounts [4]. Richard Schechner in particular, has developed a very intriguing theory of play.

Schechner (1993) begins his discussion of play by stating his preference for a concept of playing, as opposed to play: 'a continuous bending, twisting, and looping of ... that for which I can find no appropriate name, so "action" will have to do' (p.39, ellipsis in original). There are a number of important points to unpack in such a short definition. Firstly, Schechner is keen to suggest that there is no discrete event called play, as such, but rather a far more fluid and polymorphous process called playing. This emphasis on playing as a process is an important shift from fixed to more fluid notions of practice. However, I would argue that it still confines playing to one temporal rhythm, that of continuity. If events operate at a number of different rhythms and are far more mobile and permeable than Schechner's allows for, then playing becomes something which can occur across multiple temporalities and rhythms. That is to say, playing can sometimes be a continuous, bending, looping twisting 'action', but on other occasions it can also have a very abrupt beginning and/or end. As Winnicott said, playing has a time and a place, and it is important to recognize that both *place and time* can vary. In fact Schechner too is aware of this and suggests that: 'if one needs a metaphor to localize and (temporarily) stabilize playing ... "Net" is better: a porous, flexible gatherer; a three-dimensional, dynamic, flow-through container' (1993, p.41). While this metaphor promotes, in my reading, fluidity over stability, it still encompasses a sense of context which is dynamic, which is to say it allows for playing performances to occur across different temporal rhythms and spatial formations, (if one can imagine a net that can become as rigid as a cage).

However, what Schechner's net metaphor perhaps doesn't incorporate is the potential for playing to be creative in regards to time and space. That is to say, a net is still a container of sorts, whereas many geographers have already highlighted the potential for playing to create time and space, as well as take place in it (e.g. Punch, 2000; Aitken, 2001). While I fully support the recognition of the creative potential of playing, which we have already noted in Winnicott's definition, I do not wish to exaggerate this *potential*. As Gagen (2000) adeptly shows us, playing can more often than not be used to reinforce existing spatio-temporal relations and sediment existing power relations. Indeed, we might infer from Gagen's engagement with Judith Butler, that just as most gender performances are enacted to stabilize gender norms, many playing performances also work to normalize playing spaces (and times). However, as Butler notes in regards to gender, these performances never achieve the ideal. Hence it is important to consider to what extent actual playing performances live up to the norm, and to what extent they refuse and exceed it. In practice, creativity is particularly slippery to grasp, as some of my playing performance examples show later in the paper. More often than not the spatio-temporal creativity of playing created fleeting time-spaces, which were subsumed into other time-spaces as quickly as they were created.

To return to Schechner's description of playing as an 'action', the second point to note is that it is very vague. In fact, it hardly tells us anything at all about what playing *is*. However, rather than immediately dismissing such a description as

relatively useless, I want to entertain the notion that Schechner in fact wishes to eschew any (strong) ontological base for playing. That is to say, when confronted with the question, what *is* playing, rather than (attempt to) answer it, Schechner's definition destabilizes the very question itself. In thinking about 'bending, twisting and looping', I am suggesting that playing has more to do with becoming rather than being. Playing has no identity (being) itself, except as a secondary characteristic of its conceptual differentiation (becoming) – the identity of difference. We can see this identity in difference, (or the becoming of playing) in Sutton-Smith's discussion of rhetorics of play, all of which are about playing, but none of which (either on their own or cumulatively) can provide a definitive statement about what play is. This is why, in my reading, Schechner describes playing as 'action', because it is only in the performance of playing, when it is enacted in a particular space-time (the being of becoming), that we can actually define playing (fleetingly). If playing does have an identity (an ontological base), it is a weak and unstable one, at every moment prone to another becoming (or becoming-other, see Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, esp. chapter 10). Schechner elaborates on this when he asserts,

We need to stop looking so hard at play, or play genres, and investigate playing, the ongoing, underlying process of off-balancing, loosening, bending, twisting, reconfiguring, and transforming - the permeating, eruptive/disruptive energy and mood below, behind and to the side of

focused attention. (Why not 'above'? I really don't know, it's probably just cultural prejudice) (p43).

Let me pause for a moment to briefly summarize and slightly extend this argument, since it is crucial to the understanding of playing I wish to pursue in the rest of this paper. In reading Schechner, I am suggesting that playing occurs at the intersection of being and becoming. It has no identity (being), except as a secondary characteristic of its ontological difference (becoming). Therefore, we must shift our attention away from pursuing playing in its being, or in other words, trying to offer some kind of definition of what playing is, and instead investigate playing in its becoming. However, this is a self defeating enterprise, since any attempt to 'pin down' difference, will necessarily impose an identity on this difference, thus transforming the becoming into a being once again. Therefore, we must work at the intersection of being and becoming, and try to write alongside playing as difference, without trying to inhabit it. This requires, as Schechner notes, a focus on the situated 'action' or performances of playing, which returns us once again to the intersection of representation and that which exceeds it with which we began this section.

So what can we say about the performance of playing. I have already highlighted the potential of Schechner's vague definition for destabilizing the ontological base of playing. I have also discussed the importance of a temporal and spatial context, or 'net' as Schechner would have it, to discussions of playing. We can



say that this 'net' functions as a marker of the being/becoming intersection of playing, which is why any discussion of playing must always fold into a particular space-time. However, Schechner's vague definition also has its limitations when it comes to writing alongside the becoming of playing, or in other words providing us with something more concrete to work with than just 'action'. Hence, it is this term 'action' that I wish to unpack, to provide a more sustained account of what goes into each performance of playing, or each being that accompanies the becoming of playing. Therefore, rather than define playing as such, I wish to theorize certain aspects of play more fully within the loose definitional context I have outlined above. In using the term theorizing, I have in mind a process more akin to a conversation than a question and answer session, where conclusions are eschewed in favour of continued (theoretical and empirical) discussions in the future. In order to theorize playing, as I have argued above, it is necessary to explore some of my own playing performances in Hilltop Primary School (see note [1]), Bristol in the summer of 2001.

The research which I will draw on, involved conducting a performance ethnography in an inner-city primary school (5-11 years old) with just over 300 pupils. My performance ethnography involved, in a peculiar form, going back to school. Arriving at 8:30am, when most of the children did, and leaving at 3:30pm, I followed the routine of various classes as they went about their daily business. However, unlike them, I spent each day focusing my attention on anything that felt like playing. And felt here is significant, because performance ethnography

aims to use all the senses, rather than just the verbal or visual. In order to record and share these experiences, I made a research diary, in which I tried to evoke the various playing moments as I experienced them. In writing these moments, my aim was not to re-present them as such, but rather in trying to evoke them, gesture towards what did not make it on the page. I also want to use these empirical vignettes as concrete examples of playing, in order to explore the role of embodiment, affect, objects and time-space in playing performances.

### **Embodied Playing**

After registration, Mrs R. [5] begins a lesson on spelling. The reception class are all sat cross-legged on the blue carpet facing the whiteboard. They are somewhat restless, due to the heavy rain outside the window. Mrs R. says a word, then chooses someone to write the spelling on the whiteboard. While this is going on, a boy is constantly pulling the back of my chair, levering himself up to get a better view. I notice another boy at the back of the classroom trying to squash himself into a cupboard. 'Who can spell d-o-c-t-o-r?' asks Mrs R. Immediately a flurry of hands dart up into the air. A few mute cries of 'me, me' are whispered. A girl is chosen. She gives a quick triumphant glance at the boy next to her, before standing up and writing the word correctly on the board. When she returns to her place, the boy next to her sticks his tongue out. He then keeps poking her in the ribs, until she lets out a cry. Mrs R., who has been

discretely monitoring this, sends the boy to the red carpet. The boy looks longingly over at the rest of the class for a while, before playing with an envelope as if it were a glove. Back on the blue carpet, the boy who was trying to squash himself into a cupboard is now playing with a toy truck (Research Diary – Reception Class, July 2001).

The first thing that anyone will notice when doing research on playing, just as I did on my first day at Hilltop (described above), is that all playing performances are embodied. That is to say playing involves sights, sounds, smells, touch and tastes to varying degrees. This is hardly a revelation and there is also now a vast literature on embodiment within geography, which Aitken (2001) deftly channels into his discussion of children's bodies in his chapter on 'Learning through the body'. However, in many of the accounts Aitken discusses, and also in many of the accounts of playing that I have reviewed so far in this paper, part of the materiality of bodies is omitted from the picture. Alan Radley (1995) puts it nicely when he states,

The confusion lies in the equation of the epistemological determination of social life as discursive with the ontological status of the body; or put another way, the refusal to acknowledge as *different* that which cannot readily be put into words. There is good reason, therefore, to distinguish the discursive form of society from the social constructivist perspective. Once this is done, it becomes possible to consider an alternative

standpoint, one that does not deny that the body has been subjected to controls within power/discourse, but takes a different perspective on that process (p21; emphasis in original).

In other words, while bodies do signify such things as gender, race, age and ability, which have very important material consequences, the materiality of bodies *also* exceeds representation (See Foucault, 1998). It is particularly important to consider the consequences of this excess in relation to our epistemological practices. As Geraldine Pratt puts it, 'our actual research performances, the *now* of research, goes largely un(re)marked, even though they clearly exceed the written trace' (2000, p.650; original emphasis). In thinking and writing about the embodied nature of playing therefore, we must be attentive not only to the body-as-signifier, but also to the ways in which the representationally excessive aspects of corporeality work. This is particularly important because, as I will gesture towards later, it is often what is in excess of signification that comes to fore in many (but not all) playing performances [6].

### **Playing with affects**

After morning break, the science lesson begins. The pupils sit in groups of six, which I find out later have been allocated according to ability. On each table, the girls sit on one side and the boys on the other. There is a list of tasks to be completed, written on the board, since different people have

completed different things. I am sitting at a table in the middle of the classroom. Although there is talking, the pupils seem to be working diligently, whilst the teacher moves around helping those who are struggling. After a while, the boy sitting diagonally behind me, turns around and gently hits the girl sitting next to me on the back. She immediately suspects him (he has a reputation of being class joker), and tells him not to do it, without saying it so loud that the teacher hears. I keep an eye on him now, and he soon turns around again, gives me a complicit glance and gently hits her again. The girl turns and confronts him, and in his defense he blames the boy sitting next to him. A short argument with his neighbor follows, before he begins to (not so gently) hit his neighbor as punishment for supposedly hitting the girl. All the time this is happening, the girl is watching, and all three are smiling (Research Diary – Year 4 class, July 2001).

In the above account there are a number of examples of ways in which bodies represent certain processes (the gendered spatial formation of the classroom for instance). However, in offering this moment from my research, I wish to address the challenge of finding ways of talking about the playing performance (or ‘action’) that my research diary cannot represent. I have already suggested in the previous section that in part, the materiality or physicality of a body exceeds representation. Now I want to look at how the emotional aspects of a body are also non-representable. I think this is important, because it is precisely these

aspects that many people value in their playing experiences. A number of theorists from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds have also begun to address similar questions, and the name they have given to this embodied representational excess is affect. As Brian Massumi points out,

Affect is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion. But one of the clearest lessons ... is that emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders. An emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized (Massumi, 2002, p.27-8).

So if affect exceeds representation, and it is not emotion, then how exactly do we think and write about it? Building on his previous point, where ‘affect is intensity’, Massumi suggests

The realm of intensity ... is transcendental in the sense that it is not directly accessible to experience, it is not transcendent, it is not exactly outside experience either. It is immanent to it – always in it but not of it. Intensity and experience accompany one another, like two mutually

presupposing dimensions, or like two sides of a coin. Intensity is immanent to matter and events, to mind and body and to every level of bifurcation composing them and which they compose. Thus it also cannot but be experienced, in effect – in proliferations of levels of organization it ceaselessly gives rise to, generates and regenerates, at every suspended moment (2002, p.33) [7].

This is to say that affect can be gauged in its *effects*. William Connolly, in his latest book *Neuropolitics*, explores this link between emotion and intensity further. In the following statement, he provides some concrete ways of thinking about the products of affect.

Part of the affective energy mixed into thought becomes available to consciousness as feelings and concept-imbued emotions; but other thought imbued energies find symptomatic expression in the timbre of our voices, the calmness or intensity of our gestures, our facial expressions, the flush of our faces, the rate of our heartbeats, the receptivity, tightness, or sweatiness of our skin, and the relaxation or turmoil in our guts (Connolly, 2002, p.76).

The ‘complicit glance’ of the boy in the Year 4 class is one way in which affect could be gauged, as could the way in which he hit both the girl and the other boy without hurting them (much). The subtlety of this gesture – the way in which he hit

them only so hard – was not something I cognitively recognized, but rather ‘felt’. It is important to note that in my discussion so far affect could be reduced to the level of personal feelings and emotions. However, Massumi (2002) is quick to point to the contrary that affect ‘is not ownable or recognizable’ (p.28), but ‘inseparable from but unassimilable to any *particular*, functionally anchored perspective’ (p.35; original emphasis).

Hence, affect can be thought of as flowing between bodies and is thus inter-subjective, or better still a-subjective, since it ‘escapes’ actually existing structure things. We have probably all at some stage experienced the rather cliché ‘wave of fear’ or ‘mummer of delight’ when in a crowd situation, which are both ‘the capture and closure’ or the result of a particular affect or intensity. In my playing moment during the Year 4 Science lesson, we could say that a mischievously joyful affect (briefly) flowed through the children and me. None of us ‘owned’ this feeling, nor was it located ‘in’ any of us. Yet it was crucial to our enactment of that particular moment.

To briefly summarize, I am arguing that any definition of playing or embodiment that does not consider affect, ignores a vital part of what allows us to get on with our daily lives. Indeed, in weaving together scholarship on brain research, cinema, politics and culture, Connolly (2002) argues that affect is as important to thinking and judgement, as it is to feelings. But even beyond this, I am arguing that it is vital to consider affect because in many (but not all) playing



performances, it is the affective register that becomes heightened. Playing is not thoughtless as such, but rather in many instances, prioritizes non-cognitive (physical and emotional) processes, such as the playing moment in Year 4 Science. However, it is important to remember that these processes are themselves not altogether separate from cognitive thinking. Hence, while authors such as Aitken & Herman (1997) suggest that playing 'counters rationality', I would suggest instead that many (but not all) playing performances, rather than countering rationality, allow a greater role for the non-cognitive (and therefore seemingly irrational) parts of the brain (Connolly, 2002) [8].

### **Playing with different bodies**

'My pencil case is called Gibbles. And my rubbers also got a name. Gidney. He's cross and he's got big sharp teeth' (Girl, aged 9). 'Gidney', an object invested with emotions, is then passed around the table as the young people argue somewhat fiercely over who will hold him. The girl who 'owns' the rubber has the final say in what he can and cannot do (Research Diary – Year 4 class, July 2001).

It is at this juncture, as I move on to this next research moment, that I want to reopen the case file on the role of objects in playing mentioned earlier. I want to begin by considering the impact of this moment, in which objects are vital to the playing performance, to what I have so far said about theorizing playing. I have

suggested that affects, since they are asubjective, exceed even a broad definition of what we regard as human [9]. Indeed Deleuze & Guattari maintain that

[A]ffects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects (1994, p.164).

So affects can flow through objects just as they flow through humans. However, I have also suggested that playing is an embodied experience. Therefore, if we are to take seriously the role of non-humans in playing performances, then we need a reworked notion of embodiment, as far as this is understood in human terms. In order to address this challenge I wish to turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze.

Deleuze presents us with a very different conception of the body from the implicitly human body which I have been referring to thus far. Following Spinoza, Deleuze (1988) defines the individuality of a body in two ways: firstly by the relations of motion and rest, and secondly by its capacity for affecting and being affected. It is important to consider carefully exactly what Deleuze is getting at here. Firstly, both of these definitions are dynamic. Bodies never have stable identities, but rather are always prone to other becomings. [10] Thus, according

to Deleuze, even stasis is viewed as a form of relative motion [11]. While Gibbles and Gidney were a pencil case and rubber when I first encountered them, they quickly became animated beings, and in this text perhaps they are now a hybrid of the two. Secondly, both of these definitions are relational. Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, a body's individuality is never as an individual. That is to say that because bodies, as I have just noted, are always more or less mobile, then they are never entirely separable from other bodies. In fact, Deleuze argues that 'a body, however small it may be, is composed of an infinite number of particles [other bodies]' (1988, p.123) [12]. Although difficult to actually perceive in the playing moment, Gibbles and Gidney were constructed by other physical bodies (e.g. hands, the desk), and social bodies (the discussion that took place, broader ideas about the use of rubbers). We might think of the individuality of the body then as its being, or a temporary representation that the body nevertheless eludes (again) in its becoming-other. Perhaps thinking of the body's individuality as a trace or wraith, gives a better sense of what I mean when I describe individuality as partial. Thirdly, the role of affect is highlighted as key in defining bodies. The arguments over Gidney give some idea of the ways in which bodies can modify and be modified by the affective charge of a situation, creating an aggressive playing environment in this situation. I mention the role of affect not only to re-iterate that it is asubjective (i.e. belongs to no body in particular), but also to restate that affect is woven into thinking and judgement (Connolly, 2002), and hence the capacity for affecting and being affected can involve a wide variety of cognitive as well as sensual apparatus. While the arguments over Gidney

were passionate, they were also to a certain extent logical – the ‘owner’ always having the final ‘say’.

The importance of the above discussion to my thesis is expressed far more concisely by Deleuze when he states, ‘a body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity’ (Deleuze, 1988, p.127). Thus, Deleuze’s ontology of ‘the body’ is an opening up, which incorporates the non-human (‘an animal’), the non-material (‘a body of sounds’), the non-representable (‘an idea’) and multiplicities (‘a social body’). Deleuzian bodies are at once material, semiotic, social and incorporeal, as indeed bodies are when encountered in our everyday (playful) lives. I also note that for Deleuze, all bodies are conceptually equal, and thus his definition shies away from using the human/non-human definitional pairing, which still has human at its core. It is for these reasons that I wish to use a Deleuzian notion of bodies when thinking about playing. As I have suggested above, playing is irreducibly an embodied activity. To ignore the contingent role that objects, sounds, ideas and socio-cultural habits have on playing performances is to ignore the specificity and complexity of these performances (or to ignore the becoming of playing). The bodies of ‘Gibbles’ and ‘Gidney’ are as vital to the playing performance I just mentioned, as any of the ‘human’ bodies present. In fact, this diary extract doesn’t even mention the school building, the curriculum, the class rules or a host of other bodies that co-constituted playing in this particular context. Thus, I argue that a Deleuzian inspired notion of em-bodi-ment

allows a much broader consideration of what (or which bodies) co-constitute different playing performances.

### **Playing with/in time-space**

As I outlined when discussing Schechner's work, a consideration of space-times enfolded into various playing performances is vital to theorizing playing. Such a consideration is particularly important because playing has the potential to create new spaces. Playing performances erupted everywhere while I was at Hilltop, and confining my study to the *playground* would have been totally insufficient. In this respect, my research resonates with Punch's (2000) account of children's playing experiences. Having said that, a great number of the playing performances I witnessed *did* occur in the playground. The point I am making is that while some playing practices can be spatially fluid and creative, other performances most definitely aren't, and serve to normalize tightly defined (and policed) spaces of play.

The same is true when thinking about playing temporally, which was brought sharply into focus at the end of one break time. The year 5 class that I had joined that day continued to argue and 'muck about' for a good 10 minutes after the official end of break time, and this continued as they climbed the stairs and sat down for lessons. However, the year 4 class I had joined the previous week left the playground very promptly in an 'orderly' line. Reducing playing to a tightly

demarcated spatio-temporal practice would be as insufficient as only stressing its fluidity and porosity. Neither account allows for the different spatial and temporal patterns and rhythms of playing, which always occurs between the two conceptual limit cases (fixed/static) which are only conceived after the event.

### **Playing with conclusions**

So let me summarize now the main points I have made about playing. Firstly I have suggested that playing occurs at the intersection of being and becoming, which is to say that playing doesn't have a stable identity as such. It is only in specific time-space contexts that playing acquires a specific form, (the much cited work of Opie and Opie (1969) provides a comprehensive overview of many 'forms' of playing), and function (and this is where I see Winnicott's work fitting in). However, as Sutton-Smith's (1997) study shows, any attempt to define playing in its being, using either its form or function, will be theoretically limited. I am suggesting that if we are to theorize playing, then we must work to incorporate its becoming into our accounts, or what Schechner describes as 'action'. I then elaborated on Schechner's term 'action', by suggesting that playing in its becoming is always embodied, using Deleuze's philosophy to vastly expand the terrain of what counts as a body and thus what contributes to different playing performances. I have also drawn attention to affect, since it is not only a key aspect in many playing performances, but also remains largely unremarked upon in our research accounts. I am not suggesting however, that the ways in which

various bodies signify (certain identities) are not also constitutive of playing performances, merely that affect plays an important, and so far overlooked role in embodied playing. However, I do not wish to suggest that by incorporating the insights of a range of non-representational theories we will suddenly have the anecdote to overcoming partial and situated accounts. While I am offering an expansion of the terrain on which we work upon, this terrain will still always have gaps and fissures (Rose, 1997). Finally, I have suggested that playing is both constitutive of and performed within a range of space-times. While playing has the potential to be(come) spatially and temporally creative, I have warned against easy identifications between playing and spatial (and temporal) autonomy, suggesting instead that many playing performances in fact can act to normalize spaces and bodies.

Following this discussion, I would like to draw a few tentative conclusions around playing. Firstly, in theorising playing, I would suggest we must be modest. All attempts to give a definition have so far failed because they always partake of exclusions which are empirically contradicted. This was brought home to me when I saw a girl sitting quietly reading in the corner of the Hilltop playground one lunch-time. Her playing was not energetic, irrational, or opposed to 'work' [13], and the form of embodiment it took was closer to rest than motion. It is because of moments like this that I want to leave playing a conceptually open category. I urge modesty because I do not wish to colonize the becoming of playing (again), and hence I refrain from saying anything more than 'action'. It does not follow

though, that such modesty leaves us empirically high and dry. As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, we all know what playing is, which is to say there will always be a spatially, temporally and culturally situated being of playing's becoming, and each becoming builds on or departs from sedimented notions of what playing is. Hence there can be no one theory of playing as such, just theorizations that are themselves always differential relations of movement and rest, akin to an open-ended conversation.

Secondly, the Deleuzian notion of bodies that I have introduced, and the reworked notion of embodiment that it demands, recognizes that we humans are only a small part of the world and the way it works. With regards to my discussion of playing, this is another way of saying that playing is not (just) kids stuff. This is not to deny that children play a great deal, nor to suggest that studies of children playing should be de-legitimized. I simply wish to make the point that in thinking and writing about playing, we must realize that even in child-centered studies, there are a great many more bodies playing than just the young people involved. (I'm thinking once again of Gidney's playing performance). In the course of this paper, my theorization of playing certainly applies to me as much as the children involved. Playing is something we all do, albeit to different extents and degrees, and this is something that needs a great deal more investigation [14]. Certainly the next time I think of studying children and playing, maybe I'll pause a little longer to interrogate the effects that this 'and' between playing and children has on the directions I focus my critical attention.



Thirdly, there are significant methodological implications that derive from the approach to playing I have outlined in this paper. For my research I used performance ethnography as a method for investigating playing. I choose this method because in thinking through playing, I would argue in order to understand it, you have to actually do it. However, in discussing such experiences it is necessary to exercise caution. Firstly, in playing with children, my discussion (both empirical and theoretical), is based on relational knowledges. That is to say, in my discussion of the playing performances in this paper, I have not really been talking about the playing of my research participants. On the other hand, I have not been talking about my playing experiences either. The playing that contextualizes this paper occurred *between* my participants and me. It is in this sense that I think we can talk *with* young people, where talking with them means talking about the relation between us (during research) without reducing them to this relation. In this sense, I would agree with Philo (2003) that there are (albeit precarious) connections between the worlds of adults and children. I would suggest that rather than knowing 'their' world, we can instead know something about this betweenness that we both share. What occurs between adults and children is inevitably inflected by unequal relations of power, but it is, irreducibly, a shared space. The ethical task then becomes, how do we create and live in such spaces, which Aitken (2001) has begun to explore. The second methodological implication is that the re-presentation of those performances in this paper (i.e. the research diary extracts) are themselves poor catalysts for

thought and feeling. That is to say, that although I have tried to evoke the performances with words (in an attempt to engage affect), any effort to ‘capture’ affect is destined to fail. Therefore, I can only hope that the affects these words generate might be similar to those I experienced with the young people at Hilltop during my research. Such a statement also functions as a challenge for future research, to explore different methods and what other things they can tell us about playing and spacing.

My final conclusion is that playing isn’t necessarily emancipatory. Recalling the year 4 boys playing football every lunchtime, playing in this instance seemed to have more to do with performing sedimented (and gender inflected) playing practices than challenging these norms. In using playing as an important category with which to understand children’s lives, I am arguing that current approaches often only deal with half the story, largely ignoring the ways in which playing is often about conformity and socializing to an imaginary norm. The liberating potential of playing performances is thus always determined in the contingency of the encounter. Any politics based on playing therefore relies on a narrow and precarious base. I would suggest that such a politics, therefore, can do no more than modestly admit this, and look to disciplines and techniques which might aid in re-enacting this potential as extensively as possible (Connolly, 2002).

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### **Notes**

[1] This is a pseudonym, used as part of a confidentiality agreement signed with the school.

[2] I am thinking particularly of the work of Keith Ansell Pearson (1997, 1999, 2002), and his explorations of this concept in relation to the philosophy of Nietzsche, Deleuze and Bergson.

[3] I am not sure I entirely agree with this assessment. As Thrift (2000a) among others has shown, playing performances can be precisely the type of activity which contemporary capitalism colonizes in its efforts to increase workers productivity.

- [4] Readers may also wish to consult recent work on non-representational geographies (Thrift 1996, 2000b; Dewsbury et al. 2002), which drawing heavily on Performance Studies could provide similar resources. Indeed, Thrift could very well have had playing in mind when he talks about practice as ‘unwritable, unsayable, and unstable. And that is its fascination; it is a living demonstration of the skills we have but cannot ever articulate fully in the linguistic domain’ (2000b, p.235).
- [5] Mrs R. is a pseudonym for the reception teacher, used as part of the confidentiality agreement I signed with the school.
- [6] An example of a playing performance which was not primarily based on what exceeds representation is the drawing one boy, aged 7, did of a board game, itself a wonderful attempt to evoke the more affective elements of playing.
- [7] I am reminded here once again of Schechner’s injunction to work with the ‘the permeating, eruptive/disruptive energy and mood below, behind and to the side of focused attention’.
- [8] It should be noted that for Connolly, thinking is a product of the brain/body/culture network, ‘a complex, layered activity, with each layer contributing something to the ensemble of dissonant relays and feedback loops between numerous centers. These loops include many different bodily sites sending signals about the state of the body to the brain’ (2002, p.10). Hence thinking involves the interplay of cognitive, sensual and affective faculties while being irreducible to any of these distinctions.

[9] Note that Massumi (2002) suggests affect escapes 'actually existing, structure things'. This is to say, that it is not just the non-human, but even the non-organic that can affect and be affected in turn, a point I return to later in relation to Deleuze's definition of a body. See also Marks (2002), esp. chapters 11 and 12.

[10] Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) demonstrates, among other things, the great lengths that are required to maintain (discipline) a body in a particular state.

[11] Dewsbury (2000) illustrates this point well: Think of a building. Although you may think of it as a permanent structure, it is falling down, just very slowly (hopefully!)

[12] Bruno Latour (2002) provides a fantastic illustration of this idea in relation to the sociology of Tarde.

[13] Indeed, I would argue that the division between work and play is constantly susceptible to metamorphosis. Sometimes playing is barely (if at all) discernable from work (such as this girl reading in the playground), while at other times a strict partition between the two will be enacted. Most of the time the relationship between playing and working will be far more complex and difficult to disentangle - such is the nature of practice.

[14] Common wisdom dictates that children play more than adults, and Jones (2003) argument, that children's lives are more immediately structured by emotion, would seem to add weight to this assertion. However, I am

unwilling to come to any conclusions on this matter, if only because of the paucity of studies of adults' playing.

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