Back to Play: A Reply to Malaby

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ABSTRACT
This paper offers a critical reading of Thomas Malaby’s practice-theoretical approach to games to demonstrate that his account of play as a phenomenon of Western modernity requires amendment. It shows that Malaby’s valuable emphasis on practice is entirely compatible with understanding games as cultural sub-forms of play.

Thomas Malaby’s 2007 article “Beyond Play” offers one of the arguably more influential definitions of games in recent game studies (Sage 2013). In it, Malaby develops a powerful practice-theoretical, process-oriented conception of games as “semi-bounded and socially legitimate domain(s) of contrived contingency that generate(.) interpretable outcomes” (Malaby 2007: 96, cf. Malaby 2009, 2009a).

Malaby argues that we need “a new approach to games” because traditional approaches have considered “games” as a subcategory of an anthropological universal “play”, whereas “play” in its specifics – separate from real life, opposite to work, free from consequence, fun – is really a phenomenon “historically and culturally specific to Western modernity.” (Malaby 2007: 96) In addition, drawing on Stevens and Bateson (1979), Malaby argues that if play(fulness) is understood as a universal mode of experience, it cannot also be a distinct type of activity; yet this is how current approaches have treated play.

This debunking of “play” does not hold: First, Malaby does not properly engage with the rich literature that speaks for play as a human and multi-species universal (Burghardt 2005, Konner 2010, Pellegrini 2009, Sutton-Smith 1997) – his critique only applies to Huizinga (1955) and Caillous (2001). Second, theories of play do not unanimously negate serious consequence or negative emotion (Schechner 1988), nor paint play as the opposite of work (Sutton-Smith 1997, Turner 1982, Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Malaby is right to identify the predominance of these specifics as modernist – they belong to the modernist rhetorics of self and frivolity (Sutton-Smith 1997). But – third – once we properly understand them as rhetorics and norms rather than defining features, the existence of norm-deviating practices (like consequential play) does not pose a conceptual issue for play definitions anymore. Fourth, play can very well be a mode of experience and a form of activity, as Sutton-Smith (1997: 219) argues and Goffman (1986) demonstrates in his account of play as a “frame” and playfulness as a “keying,” that is, a transformation of any given activity that drastically changes meaning and experience, but actual performance only little: Any keying displays observable typical forms in which an activity is transformed. This is also the argument Bateson (1979: 138) makes when he speaks of play as one of the “categories of contextual organization of behavior.”
Based on this critique, the paper offers an account that acknowledges the practical, processual, and culturally localized quality of playing while taking into account its universality: (Animal and childhood) playing is a universal mode of engagement, recognizable in typical forms of enactment and experience that include features Malaby considers purely “modern.” Yet in human societies, we never encounter it but in locally specific, historically changing socio-cultural institutionalizations. (Adult) playfulness in contrast describes play-like transformations of action and experience in the form of play – a framing (Bateson) or keying (Goffman).

Keywords
theory of play, rhetorics of play, anthropology of play, frames, keyings, Thomas Malaby

BIBLIOGRAPHY