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Challenging Contemporary Thinking on Play

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This book was ignited by our joyous conversation with Brian Sutton-Smith in 2011. We dedicate it to all our play research collaborators such as Tilly, who features in adventurous play images, our inspirations such as Mike, whose forward-thinking series Fields of Play (1979) was one of the first interdisciplinary ludic investigations, and H, for teaching us both that play and art are always out of the box.

Warm thanks to all the book's contributors without whose generosity, imagination, curiosity and patience this book would not exist, and finally, to Dave & Martin, for putting up with its editors.

Preface

Given that 'play' continues to be over-used as a floating term in policy, arts and curricular documents, something a little more grounded is needed to unpack the complexity embedded within play. Important distinctions need to be made; we need to wrestle with what playfulness really means, especially as an interdisciplinary drive or process related to the practices of arts and sciences, or as the basis for learning and living.

We began the conversations in the early months of the pandemic in 2020 and concluded them in 2023, conducting 4-way conversations on Zoom, meeting across distance and time zones, across disciplines and generations. Our contributors are diverse in these respects and many more that emerge in the space of their dialogue, but they all have play in common as a vital aspect of their lives and work, and they are all experts in what they do. They have addressed different disciplines or fields of play, from children's play in educational settings to the zoology and ethology of animal studies; from health and safety warnings to the art of risky or breakable play and performance; from role-play or real-play to the rules and glitches of digital, onscreen and online play, to allow the reader to appreciate the complexity of play from multifaceted approaches and thus be able to transfer new understandings by making new connections.

In 2011, the editors of this collection had the good fortune to meet and interview the late great Brian Sutton-Smith at his home in Florida. A number of key themes we discussed with Brian re-emerge over the following chapters and in fact, the chapter headings of MESS, BRINK, GLITCH, THRILL, RISK, RULE, PRETEND and PROVOKE are partly influenced by the novel ways that Brian categorised play. Each chapter gives a brief introduction and explanation of each title, its principal themes and speakers.

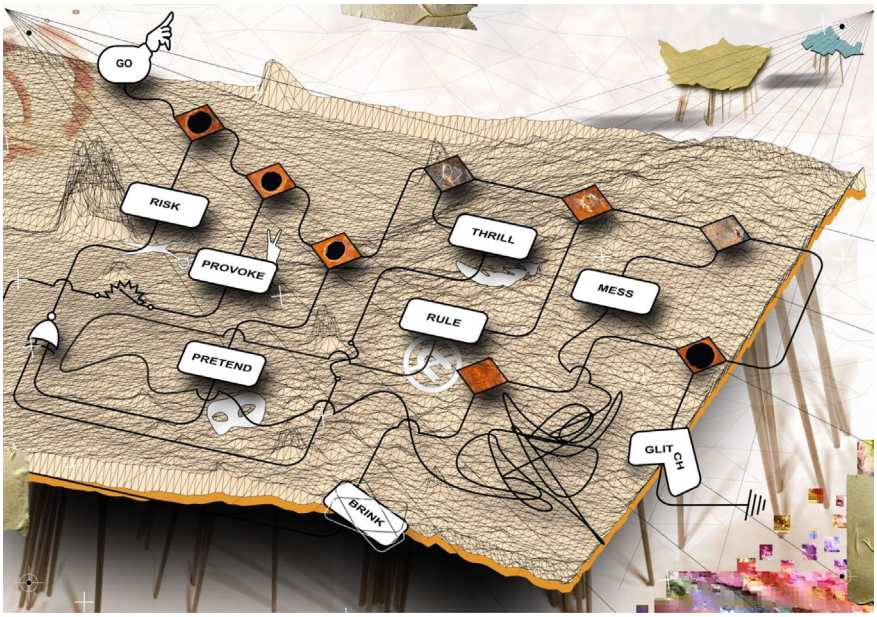

Fig. 1 Playscape Diagram Mike Phillips (2024). With kind permission of the artist

One of the book's contributors, Mike Phillips, has devised a diagram to help illustrate the multiplicity of play as this book sees it (Fig.1). The diagram illustrates thinking with play, making with play, playing with play. Picturing uneven global terrain to navigate (on unstable table legs), this moving model illustrates play as a kind of board game or interactive experiment: a mass of tangled wires and connection points exploring each eventuality of itself. It is improvisational (things can go in any direction, go right and wrong; systems can be built or break down) forever changing, mutating, deviating and sparking connections. Hinting at table-top miniature model scenarios used for battle strategy and wargames, but playing with scissors, masks, roles, norms and thrills, the diagram satirises our desire to have agency, power and control over things. Should we facilitate dark play? Is there something alive in play itself? Will play save the world or destroy it?

As explored throughout the book in relation to play, the diagram is a collective-making-with or relational 'sympoeisis', where the participant, audience or viewer completes the work and creates their own contextual understandings. The Phillips diagram suggests but does not explain a rules-based terrain. It plays with the idea of 'scaling' as change, where non-play can scale to play, bright play to dark play,

and so on, and—with some aspects appearing to be about to fall off the edge—has highlighted play's exhilarating edginess, as we have in this book.

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Introduction

Why Play?

First and foremost, it is not the goal of this collection to say what play is. Rather, it is to 'unbias the mind' as Bob Fagen (one of the book's contributors) has observed that play can do, and to engage with what we believe has been overlooked in play: to look into the unknown and to consider the discomfort of thrill-seeking, edgy, risky, controversial, dangerous, destructive but still playful forms as a means to speculate, imagine, and search for new paradigms, including what we term 'dark play' as part of the spectrum. We use dark play after Richard Scheckner's (2002) theatrical, ritual exploration of it as play that might, for example, emulate or act out serious conflict whilst not engaging in it, or the subversion of meta-cues that communicate certain actions and utterances that are supposed to be understood as playful. Subversive by nature, dark play is often designed to be chaotic, destructive, expositional, but also thrilling, transgressive, living on the edge, leaping into the void. In that sense this is a study of play by lifting the rug and going with the uncertainty.

It might be easier to theorise about what play is *not*, given that universal distinctions such as 'work versus play' and 'fun versus boredom' or contradictory truisms such as 'all art derives from play' (Huizinger, 1938) versus 'play is pure waste' (Callois, 1961) have failed to capture its multiplicity. Where Huizinger and Callois established play as voluntary and intrinsic to adult leisure, culture and society, Vygostky (1939) and Piaget fixed play as part of child development but limited it from any 'constitutive role in thought' (Sutton-Smith, 1966). Play is also symptomatic of communicative and ritualised behaviours (Bateson, 1955; Turner, 1982; Schechner, 1995) and a state of arousal or 'flow' (Csikzentmihalyi, 1971). Is play simply a state of *feeling* playful? Over recent decades play has been linked to sociocultural debates about well-being, with Brown (2010) arguing that the opposite of play is not work, but depression in the context of an ever-worsening 'play deficit' Grey (2013). Not taking play seriously will not be good for us.

Those who have studied play in natural settings (Fagen, 2005) and drawn on the findings of affective neuroscience (Damasio, 2003; Panksepp, 2008; Pellis & Pellis, 2009) tend towards ambiguity in their definitions, and suggest that play offers us more than cultural formation; rather, producing working models of variability by creating physical, emotional and mental conditions to keep a species flexible in evolution; an 'ecology of play' (Sicart, 2014). Brian Sutton-Smith's continued and radical questioning of existing play categories has always resisted play-as-progress discourses, reminding us that 'play and sanity are not the same thing' (Sutton-Smith, 1995), citing the work of folklorists around the world. Not play-as-power, nor yet play-as-self; rather, play as a discourse of multiple selves in dialectical or dialudic relationship. Sutton-Smith's legacy strongly suggests that it is not enough for process concepts of this kind to be ontological. They must be 'ontogenic', or equal to emergence (Massumi, 2014). After all this time and debate, play is still a novel and emergent field.

The boldest play theorists have also made links to aesthetics, and from unexpected disciplines. Vygotsky (1925) rejected art as ornament and saw it, like play, as expanded 'social feeling' or 'social action'—as a powerful tool in our struggle for existence, not just a developmental stage in learning (though sadly, that is how his work has been interpreted). We need likewise to dispense with the idea that we (humans) 'invented' play and to recognise that error as our tendency to colonise and re-story the past. The ethologist Fagen reminds us that by the time humans appeared, play and aesthetics already had a long evolutionary history. In stating 'that sensory preferences can be non-adaptive yet evolve means that scholars must re-evaluate previously hypothesised roles for animal play in the evolutionary origins of art,' Fagen calls for a re-evaluation of play, believing that 'adaptation to unpredictability holds keys to many puzzling questions in contemporary play research, evolutionary aesthetics, cognitive science and sociobiology' (Fagen, 2005). We are not suggesting in this collection that play is in any way equivalent to art, but in her book on nonsense, Stewart argues that:

> 'Play is characterised by a particular leap from the world of everyday life, transforming its common-sense constraints upon invention and the boundaries of meaning; play involves the construction of another other space/time another domain having its own procedures for interpretation. The transition to the playground is marked by a particular kind of attention, a particular tension in consciousness that may be pleasurable. In all these characteristics, play overlaps with aesthetic activity' (Stewart, 1993).

Though play might occasionally be championed, it is also increasingly threatened or sanctioned. Coming out of the coronavirus pandemic has emphasised this fact, as groups including children and youth, differently abled or those with material and economic disadvantage were much less able to come together to play joyously. And if they did, racialised people and young people were also far more likely to be penalised for apparent contravention of rules[1]. A Mexican review of the research literature (Kourti et al., 2021) conducted across Europe and North America found that, in general, outdoor play was reduced during the pandemic and there was an increase in

[1] https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt5801/jtselect/jtrights/1364/136407.htm.

indoor play and videogame-screen time. COVID-19 was present in children's pretend play. Children's play was still a key contributor to children's mood and wellbeing, and carers and teachers were especially concerned about how children's play was affected during lockdown measures.[2]

This collection offers challenges and critique to over-used or lazy applications of play and brings it back to the area of culture and within conceptual reference. We consider play as a global concept: the historical root of play's centrality to all cultures, all histories, even while we seek to unmask the colonial and normative frames that have contributed to particular play theories becoming entrenched while others are excluded, and we aim to offer a contemporary notion of play in the present moment.

Why Conversations?

We were aware that reflections on play, perhaps through the need to be taken seriously by various institutional forces (education, academia, publishing, etc.), have become formalised, even formulaic. Play, like our institutions, needs to find space for lateral thinking and self-critique. Play is unexpected and surprising, reflecting on its successes and failures through its own working/playing process, yet that is all too seldom a part of scholarly enquiry into play.

We have chosen conversation as the format for this book in order to free play dialogue from the strictures or conventions of academic writing, to open out possibilities for personal, frank, spontaneous discussion and speculative theories that challenge the orthodoxies of play—not as a means to defining or 'solving' the topic, but to truly question it; to see whether new juxtapositions allow us to learn new things about play. As Rupert Wegerif argues, to be engaged in something dialogic 'means seeing things (or feeling things or thinking things) from at least two points of view at once' which is the only way to see things differently, take other perspectives on board, and enact change. Our hopes were that carefully selected speakers with a real passion for a particular perspective on play would enter into dialogue with each other where their ideas would resonate together, merge in some ways, clash in others and stimulate the emergence of new ideas. This shared space of mutual resonance is 'dialogic space' and without it there is no real dialogue and no real learning' (Wegerif, 2017). The narrative of this collection is thus essentially that of learning through listening, and reflecting on expert practitioners' thoughts and playful making practices (conceptual and haptic) as capable of generating theory and further thinking.

[2] Yet play is a constitutional right for children in accordance with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which highlights the 'right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (Article 31, 1989). No such statement exists for adult (human) rights to play, other than rights to 'freedom of expression', to 'cultural life' and to 'rest and leisure'.

Why Interdisciplinarity?

To enter into dialogic space, individuals have to have a dialogic orientation or to 'be open to the other', and of course the 'other' may represent differences of age and experience, location, race, gender, sexuality, theory, philosophy, discipline, method, data, analysis, and so on. Our contributors are diverse in these respects and many more that emerge in the space of their dialogue, but they all have play in common as a vital aspect of their lives and work, and they are all experts in what they do. We felt it was particularly important to address different disciplines or fields of play, from children's play in educational settings to the zoology and ethology of animal studies; from health and safety warnings to the art of risky or breakable play and performance; from role-play or real-play to the rules and glitches of digital, onscreen and online play, all housed together in one publication in order to allow the reader to appreciate the complexity of play from multifaceted approaches and thus be able to transfer new understandings by making new connections.

As Fagen has pointed out in the context of animal studies, playing, or slipping at the limits of control, implies all cognitive domains (mapped by Gardner, Damasio, etc.) including emotion, aesthetics, creativity and innovation (in Mahon et al., 2005). Exploring the aesthetics of wonder and the poetics of surprise, Philip Fisher (1999) argues for interdisciplinary approaches, since 'the disequilibrial, variational structure of play sequences necessarily produces novel experience. Scratch economics and you get ludics, scratch adaptation and you get creativity and flexibility: nature pulling itself up by its bootstraps' (in McMahon et al., 2005). Disruption is an important part of keeping subjects (people and disciplines) alive. Playfulness can be a methodological tool for thinking and working across disciplines, seeking chance encounters and unintended discoveries across concordant and discordant threads of research.

Cross-disciplinary thinking and dialogue thus have the capacity to first exchange and then change ideas. Brian Sutton-Smith, arguably the leading play scholar for the past 50 years, reflected that we have moved beyond fixed cognitive (Piaget), developmental (Froebel), psychological (Bruner), or psychoanalytic (Winnicott) notions of play to increasingly open, cultural (Huizinger), and creative (Singer) models, in which play can transform society. 'Play may socialise not simply by imparting behaviours that integrate players onto their cultural systems, but by providing them with innovative alternatives that they may be able to use to change that cultural system' (Sutton-Smith, 1979).

Why Dark Play?

In 2011 the editors of this collection had the good fortune to meet and interview the late great Brian Sutton-Smith at his home in Florida. Brian had already sent an

archive of his works and notes to the Strong Museum of Play,[3] which we also visited to research that archive. This book begins with an edited version of our discussion (which, in its entirety, lasted almost four hours) and was an absolute delight from start to finish. There are a number of key themes we discussed with Brian that re-emerge over the following chapters, and in fact, the chapter headings of MESS, BRINK, GLITCH, THRILL, RISK, RULE, PRETEND and PROVOKE are partly influenced by the novel ways that Brian categorised play. Our decision to focus on these aspects of play was principally that they are all too often overlooked, and, as Mike Phillips's *Playscape Diagram* in the Preface actively shows, overlap in countless dimensions and directions.

But it is Brian's interview that begins this collection, as our homage to his work, and the direction of his thinking at the end of his long career studying play. Visiting the Sutton-Smith archive in the Rochester Museum of Play, his folders were full of articles, cuttings, correspondence, student essays, children's drawings, doodles, cartoons, an African chant written on the back of an envelope, his scribbles on a ticket to Steven Sondheim's theatre production *Into The Woods* ('how we stay innocent') and a train ticket ('play is the real behaviour, the rest is not'), a list of Amish games, and an account of a visit to a sex shop to interview the shop assistant, where they ended up, via sado-masochism, discussing games of war which Brian called 'a hole in the dark'. Almost uniquely in a field preferring utopian, developmental models, Brian demonstrated that play is not innocent and can be dark.

The philosopher Augustine called light and dark not opposites, but 'contraries', and he viewed them as independent. The physical force known as 'dark energy' and the matter connected with it (dark matter) are termed 'dark' simply because we cannot yet observe or understand them. Physicists perceive darkness as stored in readiness to become light. We would argue in a similar frame that 'dark play' is probably a dense form of hitherto idealised interpretations and as such, is as crucial to our overall understanding of play as dark matter is to the universe. The anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson first explored dark play as it related to deception and subversion, raising the question during play 'Is this play?' (Bateson, 1956). The concept re-emerged with Clifford Geertz's 'Deep Play' in Balinese cockfights (2005) and Richard Scheckner's coining of 'dark play' to describe that which occurs between improvising actors when contradictory realities co-exist. Towards the end of the 20th century, Sutton-Smith and others (Fagen, 2005; Pelligrini, 1995) were pointing to 'play's darker side', as well as to addictions such as gambling, gaming, alcohol or drugs (Brown, 2010). Whilst acknowledging that some forms of play are controversial, such as the dark side to digital gaming (Mortensen, 2015), this collection is informed by the belief that researching these areas could offer radically new insights and paradigms that will be of ultimate benefit to health and well-being.

Brian Sutton-Smith's archive is evidence of a man whose life's work was the stuff of play, and it reads like his 1979 list of play's qualities: a cornucopia of arousal,

[3] The Strong Museum of Play (2006) is in Rochester, New York, and is the only collections-based museum anywhere devoted solely to the study of play. It also houses the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play.

flexibility, imagination, manipulation, variability, quick and light movement, transformation, paradox, self-generating processing, and adaptive potential. Allowing for play's ambiguity, Brian called playful disgust 'courageous parody', welcoming the transgressive and subversive into the debate. Brian's interdisciplinary dialudic approach included research into play history and cross-cultural studies of play, as well as research in psychology, neurology, education and (predominantly) folklore. He maintained that the interpretation of play must involve all its forms, from child's play to arts, sports, gambling, festivals, daydreaming and nonsense. He still saw play as an extraordinary initiation and adaptation to the perils of survival, and as cultural integration, whilst simultaneously—and with his characteristic, intentional ambiguity—letting play exist in what the folklorist Roger Abrahams (2011) called 'set-aside worlds, where there is little to worry us but the experience of experience itself', or, for Brian, 'living for a time somewhere else.'

Preferring his own term 'dialudic'[4] over dialectic for play's antithetical complexities, Brian wished to develop this dialudic theory from neurological advances in our understanding of the brain. Thanks to neurologists such as Jaak Panksepp's studies of the playful, dreamlike circuits of the brain, play is known to be functionally similar to dreaming, and both REM and play are heavily under the control of neuro-transmitters such as dopamine and serotonin. As Brian put it more poetically, 'play is a field of dreams'. Panksepp separated play from curiosity and aggression (although these can be active during play) and saw play as being of critical importance to the cultural and epigenetic construction of sophisticated social brains that can understand the emotional states and motivations of others. Using this model, Brian wrote: 'Play is neurologically a relative itch of the amygdala, one that responds to archetypal shock, anger, fear, disgust and sadness. But play also includes a frontal lobe counter, reaching for triumphant control and happiness and pride. Play begins a major feature of mammalian evolution and remains a major method of becoming reconciled with our being within our present universe' (Sutton-Smith, 2008).

Play is the universe across the street. Meeting Brian in person a few years before he died was a catalysing experience for the editors of this book and a moment of felicitous timing. He had already had one stroke, but was still a lucid and hilarious storyteller, and in many ways, hearing him speak in person about his lifes's topic was a game-changer for us. Through over fifty publications on the subject he had wrestled with play, experimenting with grouping it into categories such as the famous four: play as learning, play as power, play as fantasy, and play as self. In his best-known work, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian departs from what he calls 'the idealisers' such as Huizinger and Callois (who see play as a form of voluntary, intrinsic leisure) and mapped out models to test their flexibility and adaptation; a strategy he returned to in *The Rhetorics of Play* and his unpublished work, *Play as Emotional Survival.*

As part of our visit, he took us on a tour of his home in Florida, wickedly and flirtatiously saying he wanted to start with the bedroom. There he showed us a large, framed print of 'Children's Games' by Flemish artist Pieter Breugel the Elder

[4] The term 'dialudic' is a portmanteau of the dynamic duality of the contenting forces of dialectics with the 'ludic'—spontaneous, undirected playfulness.

Fig. 2 *Kinderspiele [Children's Games]* Pieter Breugel the Elder (1560). Painting, Netherlands. (Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

(1560). You know the painting: figures of all ages have taken over the town square to roll hoops, walk on stilts, ride hobby horses, fences or barrels, play at holy mass or weddings, stage mock tournaments, play leap-frog and piggyback, throw, swing, climb, swim, dance, wrestle, juggle, gamble, perform handstands, do dodgy things in dark corners, blow bubbles, inflate pig's bladders, piss about and *seriously* play; about 80 games in all. As we stood admiring the painting (Fig. 2) we chatted about folly, games of chance, and the unpredictability and capriciousness of fate, and suddenly Brian told us of his beloved wife Shirley's death in 2002. This is exactly Breugel's irony in the painting. Its Flemish title was '*Khinderspill*' and it is a reminder—in 80 lessons—of how surviving what life throws at us is in fact anything *but* child's play.[5]

"Why do we study play?" Brian asked. "We study play because life is crap. Life can be crap and full of pain and suffering, and the only thing that makes it worth

[5] We later found out that Brian had been visiting Professor at the University of Leuven in 1991, in the same Flemish district where Breugel, in the 1500s, created this masterpiece. As well as possibly symbolic of the Seasons or the Ages of Man (sic), Breugel may have been referencing a folkloric poem published in Antwerp in 1530 in which humankind is compared to children who are entirely absorbed in their foolish games and concerns.

living—the only thing that makes it possible to get up in the morning and go on living—is play."

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About the Editors

Dr. Victoria de Rijke is Emerita Professor of Arts & Education at Middlesex University in London, UK, and Co-Chief Editor of *Children's Literature in Education Journal*. Her research and publication is transdisciplinary across the fields of literature and the avant-garde visual arts, children's literature, media, play and animal studies, through the associations of metaphor. Publications include *The Untimely Art of Scribble* (2023), with Jayne Osgood, 'Telling story: The Carrier Bag theory of Fiction as a means of reciprocal 'researching-with' children', in *Postdevelopmental Approaches to Childhood Research Observation*, (2023), with David Ball, 'Enhancing the resilience of children and young people in a risky world', in: SRA-E Conference (2017). Playful art exhibitions include *Supertoys* (2010) and *The Duck's Dialectic* (2004). Victoria has collaborated with Rebecca Sinker for many years, such as under RebVik, co-constructing the picturebook The *A–Z of Dangerous Food* (2016), with Howard Hollands and Claire Pajaczkowska for performance 'Art is not play but a leap in the dark' at Tate Modern (2016) or writing, such as with Mike Phillips 'Playing in the dark with online games for girls' for *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* Special: Dark Play in Digital Playscapes (2017) and "The Empty Box" *Playground, PG4* Tate Gallery (2015).

Dr. Rebecca Sinker has worked within arts education and museum learning for over three decades, from small independent community arts organisations, through higher education and large national institutions, including the British Library and The Photographers' Gallery. For 15 years she was a senior manager in the Learning Department at Tate, as Senior Research Curator: Digital Learning and before this Head of Young People's Programmes. In 2020, Rebecca led the cross-site team that established a new mode of curating and hosting Tate's online programme, in response to the pandemic. Since 2021 Rebecca has been pursuing new projects as an independent curator and researcher, including producing a diverse cultural programme in Hastings, for Refugee Week (2022–24), consulting on a new annual

children's art prize for the Museum of Art Pudong in Shanghai and working as Interim Business Manager for the Institute of International Visual Arts (iniva) in 2024–25. Rebecca has collaborated with Victoria de Rijke for many years, such as under RebVik, co-constructing the picturebook The *A–Z of Dangerous Food* (2016), with Howard Hollands and Claire Pajaczkowska for performance 'Art is not play but a leap in the dark' at Tate Modern (2016) or writing, such as with Mike Phillips 'Playing in the dark with online games for girls' for *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* Special: Dark Play in Digital Playscapes (2017) and "The Empty Box" *Playground, PG4* Tate Gallery (2015).

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Interview with Brian Sutton-Smith

Brian Sutton-Smith, Victoria de Rijke, and Rebecca Sinker

Brian Sutton-Smith *(1924–2015), spent his lifetime exploring the cultural significance of play, arguing that neither children nor adults are innocent in their play, and addressing play's ambiguity and interdisciplinarity. Trained as a Primary teacher, where he wrote playful fiction for children, he travelled to the US on a Fulbright scholarship to research children's games and toys, folklore, play, drama, film and narrative. Author of some 50 books and 350 articles including Toys and Culture (1986) The Ambiguity of Play (1997) and Play for Life (2015), Brian was unquestionably the foremost play theorist of his time, changing how we see it. This conversation took place at his home in Florida in 2011. Brian was 87.*

Brian: Well, shall we start? This is the life, as it were, and what I wrote about in the *Ambiguity* book. The first thing I discovered was the variability of play. I started off by characterising in my own way: play as daydream, fantasy, another character solitary play, another character playful behaviours, informal, social play, endurance play, and other vicarious plays (you see I'm trying to cover the whole bloody universe) performance play, celebration and festivals, contests, games and sports, risky and deep play. When I counted up all the different categories, I was dealing with 380 different concepts of play. That's where I started, with this incredible variability of the phenomenon, you know? And what I did at first was try to get myself a limited number of functions, and these are the rhetorics I listed in *The Ambiguity of Play*. Soon I had nice little things like lists and diagrams… (Fig. 1).

Victoria: This is where you map the field.

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