A Reassessment of Children's Folklore Classification

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In his magnum opus, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), psychologist and children's folklore scholar Brian Sutton-Smith traces the concept of play from older to more contemporary associations and argues that underlying every prominent definition of play is a rhetoric, a Kuhnian paradigm informing the research questions and objectives of studies about play. Sutton-Smith defines a rhetoric as "a persuasive discourse, or an implicit narrative, wittingly or unwittingly adopted by members of a particular affiliation to persuade others of the veracity and worthwhileness of their beliefs" (8). For instance, among the oldest rhetorics identified by the author is the concept of play as fate, associated with games of chance that, by virtue of uncertain outcomes, mimic the belief that humans are controlled by destiny and other forces (9). On the other hand, play's association with progress has dominated theories of animal and child development for about two hundred years, impacting the way educators see "playful imitation as a form of children's socialization and moral, social and cognitive growth" (9). Other notions of play identified by Sutton-Smith include frivolity, power and identity. I mention these examples to illustrate the contribution of such a foray into the history of ideas, namely, to prompt us to consider our own disciplinary assumptions and boundaries.

Aided by Sutton-Smith's work, and after reviewing some of the key studies on children's games and lore in the last one hundred years,[1] in the present essay I identify a 'rhetoric of play' that applies both to the academic study of children's games and to their popular perception: that is, the nostalgic lament of the transition from outdoor, group and physical games to indoor, solitary and digitally mediated games. This dichotomy is not only implicated in determining what qualifies as suitable material for the folkloristic study of children's play; it also echoes adult concerns that children have less opportunity for 'free' outdoor recreation than they themselves had.[2]

Children's play is increasingly associated with solitary indoor entertainment rather than with street play among peers (Sutton-Smith 1986, 170), a point that both academics and general observers find disturbing. Valentine's *Public Space and the Culture of Childhood* (2004) confirms that parents in the United Kingdom lament their children's lack of access to the outdoor play of their own youth, while at the same time giving reasons to be concerned about child safety, traffic and stranger dangers being two factors that limit outdoor play. These concerns appear in scholarship at least as early as the 1980s in studies of children's play spaces, both in adult-controlled play programs and in more child-derived play areas in urban and rural environments (Moore 1986, Dargan and Zeitlin 1990, Olwig and Gulløv 2003, Hörschelmann and Schäfer 2005, Kraftl, Horton and Tucker 2007).

Paralleling these studies, a nostalgic baby-boomer generation is spawning a revival of its own childhood culture in publications on popular pastimes of the 1950s and 1960s (for example, Dankner and Tartakover 1996). Books include the

"unlikely bestseller" (Williams 2007, 9) *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, written by Irish brothers Conn and Hal Iggulden (2006), and websites like "Nostalgia Online," an Israeli forum with an accompanying book of games and other amusements.[3] In the Israeli case, which has been the focus of my own research, there are even manuals and revivals of traditional games by television campaigns and game manufacturers (Zuk 2007). These projects and others are geared variably towards adults and children, their resurgence encouraging interaction and reconnection across the generation gap. One might call it a folk revival worthy of study in itself.

Similarly, when we survey recent academic publications on children's folklore, we continue to see an emphasis on the familiar genres.[4] A noteworthy example is the edited volume *Children's Folklore: A Source Book* (Sutton-Smith et al. 1995), with case studies dealing with outdoor games (Beresin 75-92), "Songs, Poems, and Riddles" (Sullivan 145-60), "Tales and Legends" (Tucker 193-212), and "Teases and Pranks" (Jorgensen 213-24). More recent examples are *Play Today in the Primary School Playground* (Bishop and Curtis 2001) and *At Play in Belfast: Children's Folklore and Identities in Northern Ireland* (Lanclos 2003), both focusing on school playground games and lore. What seems clear from this brief survey is the academic and popular convergence in valuing, dare I say idealizing the familiar, "classic" forms of play. But the work of folklorists should not stop here.

If scholars have tended to privilege outdoor recreation, youth cultures and oral traditions (McNamee 1998, Mechling 2000), they can no longer ignore, for instance, the impact that computer and video games have on young people and their implications for learning in a digitally mediated society, especially as these indoor games are much more dominant and popular than before in game history. On the other hand, the burgeoning literature on computer and video games, which tends to focus on "the negative effects of playing [them]" and their potential for learning and achievement in the workplace" (Yee 2006a, 3, Yee 2006b, Suellentrop 2007, 63), could stand to benefit from ethnographic assessments in the vein of Gary Alan Fine's work on role playing games of the *Dungeons and Dragons* variety (1983). Such role playing games are the precursors to MMORPG's, or massively multi-user online role playing games, suggesting that such activities are not so different from one another.

I am not suggesting that qualitative studies have not been done in other fields; on the contrary, studies of digital games address a variety of subjects including gender preferences (Hayes 2007), character formation (Hayes 2007, Yee 2006a), perceptions of the fluidity of identity (Turkle 1995), and virtual community affiliation (Yee 2006a). Journals dedicated to the subject, like *Game Studies* (since 2001)[5] and *Games and Culture* (since 2006), and a number of conferences (see Raessens 2006, 52) provide platforms for these discussions. What I do envision, however, is a fruitful give-and-take whereby folklorists can adapt their schemas of what qualifies as children's folklore to address these forms of play. Folklorists, who are, after all, adept at identifying the parameters of new and changing generic forms of human expression (for example, Tucker 2002-3), can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what is going on in these framed activities. For instance, through ethnographic research folklorists can evaluate the extent

to which children and teens who from a young age engage in mass-mediated digital gaming experience it as hyper-reality or a simulation of reality (Baudrillard 1983, 38 in Rodaway 1995, 246). Indeed, folklorists' specialization in identifying the devices that key alternate frames of discourse and behavior as separate from ordinary reality equips us amply for exploring these terrains. By rethinking and expanding our concept of what qualifies as children's folklore, we can contribute new perspectives on play, peer interaction, and identity issues while staying abreast of these developments.

To move us towards a more inclusive schema of children's activities, I propose looking critically at a defining feature of our field: genres. Much of folklore scholarship has been defined by genres (Harris 1995, 509), and to a great extent they have defined the subfield of children's folklore. In this essay I will revisit Roger Abrahams' genre classification in "The Complex Relations of Simple Forms" (1976), in light of three authors' works on children's folklore — works that have bent the genre frame and argued going beyond it. Next, rather than propose yet another model for classifying children's folklore genres, I will show that our existing models could accommodate current research and suggest questions for future studies. This is not so much a prescriptive statement as it is a formulation of an observed trend that ought to aid our thinking about the direction the field is going.

Abrahams' Classification of Folklore Genres

Abrahams explains the usefulness of generic classification in "The Complex Relations of Simple Forms" (1976) thus: "We point to the genres because by naming certain patterns of expression we are able to talk about the traditional forms and the conventional contents of artistic representation, as well as the patterns of expectation which both the artist and audience carry into the aesthetic transaction" (193). Abrahams devised a continuum for depicting the relations among the various genres of folklore according to performer-audience interaction that each genre involves (199). On one end of the continuum are placed the most spontaneous conversational utterances such as superstitions and proverbs, which express traditional knowledge applied to solve a specific conflict. The relationship between 'performer' and 'audience' in the conversational genres is direct; for instance, a proverb teller is the performer of the folk item, while the recipient of its embedded wisdom is cast in the role of the audience. The middle of the continuum involves slightly more removed interactions: it contains genres of 'play' ranging from riddling and joking to spectator sports and debates and concludes with festivals and rituals, folk drama where traditional role playing involves a high degree of formality and where the resolution of the conflict is predetermined (208). Towards the second half of the continuum, where involvement is "primarily through vicarious identification," are the fictive genres such as fables, epics, ballads and other familiar narrative forms. Finally, the scheme ends with the most planned and 'static' forms that "present us with a *fait accompli,* an embodied resolution" (209). The static end of the continuum includes folk painting, folk sculpture, and folk design.

While this model accounts for performer-audience interaction only, through which it elucidates the relationships among the genres in an accessible and convincing way, its shortcoming as far as play is concerned is that it does not account for interaction, identification or engrossment in the static genres themselves, some of which are placed outside of the realm of folklore — what Abrahams calls "a product of technology" (213) — nor does it make room for considering the figurative and dynamic play world to which that they may give rise.[6] And yet, folklorists have demonstrated the imaginative capacity of children when playing with mass-produced toys.

For instance, in *Toys As Culture* (1986) Sutton-Smith tests the belief that manufactured toys inhibit children's imagination as opposed to natural toys or "open-ended toys" which some parents in the study advocate. He concludes that "There is no evidence that the modern child either is or is not more creative with his current 'plastic' play things than were his predecessors with bits of wood or stones" (11). Rather, he argues that toys are an agency for the imagination, and that the older children get, the more playful imagination dominates the toys, transforming them to make them suitable for their plans. In other words, the child controls the toys rather than the other way around (204). Similarly, Beresin challenges us to consider whether a mass-produced action figure does not also constitute a folk toy (1997, 799). Instead of dismissing it as outside the realm of folklore, Beresin emphasizes that "it is only the unused toy … divorced from both a performance context and ludic tradition — that may not become an actual folk toy" (799). Indeed, toys can be used to act out a new set of conflicts as well as resolutions, both in group and in solitary activities, for not only do children engage in individual play earlier in their life than they do in social play, but there are circumstances where children are perfectly capable of amusing themselves in the absence of playmates. Jeannie B. Thomas reveals in a chapter on playing with dolls how one boy cast his Barbie, Ken, and a handful of G.I. Joe dolls in television show scenarios. She writes, "By using television's Cleaver family as a model, he created and manipulated a positive family through his dolls." In Thomas's interpretation, "his play extended his concerns about family and became a way of addressing family issues and comforting himself about them" (2003, 135). Further, in this boy's play Barbie was transformed to Godzilla and a cowboy, and the G.I. Joes into fashion critics (135).

Another significant aspect of toys relates to the relationship that players develop with them. Sutton-Smith argues that children can come to identify with toys to an extent that they shape their sense of self for a long time, and as they endure such 'life companions' may have a "prognostic destiny in the subsequent life of the child" (1986, 216); this observation is in line with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's work "Objects of Memory" (1989) on the function and meaning that material culture holds for individual life review. Play with toys as a solitary rather than group activity is missing in Abrahams' discussion and should also be taken into account.

The above statements about toys as static objects that are nevertheless incorporated into the interactive play world of children, not only in the moment of playing but over the course of the life span, or part of it, support the inclusion of toys, including mass produced ones, by virtue of the dynamic play world they

spawn, in the children's folklore repertoire. This is especially relevant considering that at times toys are marketed in relation — and in complement to — television programs or other games, thus tying the products together in "dominating imaginative schemas" (Sutton-Smith 1986, 204) whence players draw inspiration and access models of behavior for the play world they (re)constitute with these toys. As televised narratives become prominent in children's play schemes, Sutton-Smith ventures that "[players] will not be over-determined by the particular commercial, but the range of what they will think about is increasingly influenced, even confined by what they see on television" (190). In the author's example, cowboy films frame play with hats and sticks but other objects seen as fitting the schema will be incorporated if available; for instance, water pistols may be used as weapons in a re-enacted battle game. A related anecdote I have heard comes from a player of the computer game SIM CITY who, upon venturing out to the "real world," felt an urge to direct people to perform different tasks, as he would do in the game.

This point is made explicit in Gary Alan Fine's book *Shared Fantasy*, which demonstrates that role playing games (of the board game variety) can serve as a keying device for leaping to an alternative world where players identify with their character to an extent even they sometimes find disturbing. Fine shows that the engrossment of players in the games corresponds with the attachment they develop to their characters. He writes:

> Games are quintessential examples for frame analysis because of their capacity for inducing engrossment … The significance of gaming resides in the shared nature of the engrossment … and in the supportive recognition that others are equally engrossed (1983, 182).

As "shared fantasy," gaming enables role-play and immersion in a manner that Abrahams attributes to play genres like festival and folk drama, but Fine's statement is equally attributable to the experience of video gaming. Identity, role-play and engrossment are aspects of play that consume game manufacturers and social science researchers alike. Thus, as both children and adults identify with and make creative use of 'static genres' (for example, Handelman 1990, Turkle 1995), and players of a wider age range now constitute an entirely new leisure subculture of gamers (Mayra 2006), these genres present valuable avenues of folkloristic research. Further, questions about gaming behavior must now take account of the shift from age-based peer groups to multi-generational gaming communities, a reality which troubles the conception of children's folklore as a body of traditions "performed by children without the influence of adult supervision or formal instruction" (Grider 1997, 123) and of childhood as a state delimited by biological age.

Reassessment

Given that "a great deal of children's play is now associated with toys [and other mediated games] and with their relatively solitary play condition, than with street

play among their peers" (Sutton-Smith 1986, 170), it is only fitting that folklorists should apply their expertise to the study of play behavior and group dynamics to non-traditional genres. I propose that if we extended Abrahams' genre continuum to include toys, manufactured games, role-playing, video and computer games, we would dissolve the dichotomy between outdoor peer-group play and isolated playing and replace it with a dynamic relation among familiar and emergent forms. For as video gaming consoles might isolate children from one another physically, they bear the potential to expand their virtual community by connecting players online. Indeed, the digital game industry's aim of "total immersion" [7] might place some traditional games and computer games on the same experiential plane with comparable physical and cognitive engagement. As one article reports, a 10 year-old boy who learned to play marbles at a workshop compared it to "being inside a video game" (Williams 2007, 9), a reversal that echoes Baudrillard's formulation of the hyper-real as a system of signs with the loss of original referents (1983, 2-5 in Rodaway 1995, 246-7. See also Turkle 1995 on the mediation of reality in malls, television and MUDs).[8]

The increasingly porous boundaries between 'real' and 'virtual' worlds extend also to the perception of self — Frans Mayra writes about the "identity-forming potentials" that digital games carry as a leisure form in late industrial societies:

> The fascinations of an unexplored world, unsolved puzzles, or unlocked but nevertheless attainable skill level can be very compelling indeed. They do not only show us something new, but they grant us something new in ourselves — a new venue or potential for self-realization. When flying a griffin high over the lands in World of Warcraft, I in a sense become something new, a subject transformed and redefined by its capacity to engage in this kind of fantastic action (2006, 104-105).

Taking these phenomena into consideration — attachment to toys and fantasy role play characters and the meaning they hold for players' identities — expands folklorists' treatment of games and play forms not traditionally considered under the rubric of children's folklore. Presumably on account of these transformations, Bishop and Curtis incorporate the role of imagination in their own "Classification of play traditions" according to whether genres possess high verbal, physical, or imaginative content (2001, 14). Although 'games with playthings,' 'making things' and 'collecting things' are placed at the "High physical content" end of the chart, the authors acknowledge that there is room for moving genres around. For instance, rhymes may be used independently or to supplement ball-bouncing games, thus moving the game from 'high verbal content' to 'games with playthings' under the category of 'high physical content.' (15). In addition, they include a "high imaginative content" category that includes role enactment and acting games, thus enabling us to insert manufactured games like *Dungeons and Dragons* here. Like Abrahams, Bishop and Curtis are aware that some categories may cross over and even change (15).

Expanding the above schema of traditional children's play activities by drawing a line connecting toys to role-playing and video games, we are posing a relation between these forms and various levels of immersion and identification. If we included toys and digital games in the genre continuum, we would be in a better position to explore the relationships between existing and emergent forms of play from the point of view of physical and cognitive immersion. We may find a surprising reversal in children's play via what I call globalized gaming: as children become more physically isolated in their play, their virtual community is geographically expanded by games that connect players online. As we seek to assess children's deprivation from outdoor recreation and its consequences, we might begin by asking how children experience their reality by using immersion to connect physical and cognitive games involving static objects such as dolls or toys to genres with elements that are similar to 'acting,' to fantasy role-playing games and to digital virtual reality games, where "total immersion" occurs. Perhaps focusing on the role of empathy in these activities can complement the ongoing biological research on mirror neurons' connection to empathy.

As the boundaries between virtual and real, work and play blur (Yee 2006b), and these forms of mediation may be present to a degree that is unsettling to folklorists, we might ask what genres of traditional artistic expression grow out of the digital world and what communities grow out of it.[9] The meanings generated by new configurations of community, through references to gaming experiences and the creation of new verbal expressions, are among the phenomena to which folklorists are attuned. I suggest the following questions to generate future research: how might we reconsider the significance of Bateson's frame analysis for digital gaming? What might research from a bodylore perspective (Young 1994) discover about players' internalization and mimicry of their avatars' movements and reactions to emotionally powerful situations in the game world? If there is a scientific basis for research on the "mirror neurons," which claims that they work the same way whether you act or see someone else acting, what is the difference between playing with a favorite doll or watching a personally crafted avatar perform an action? And how might role playing function in each case to resolve conflict, both in the game world and in person-to-person situations? Finally, as 25% of users of MMORPGs (massively multi-user online graphical environments) are teenagers (Yee 2006a, 16), what distinguishes their performance from those of adults in terms of acquired skills, their preferences for making online friends, and their experience of the world?

These questions about children's play touch on the most fascinating issues in social science research today. Abrahams presented a framework for thinking about role-distance and the variability of involvement in folklore genres. At this stage of the game, folklorists' forays into these play forms should yield fruitful insights into the competences that young people are developing through their play and the way these culturally-mediated forms of learning interact with the brain's capacity to master a set of skills that were untapped two generations ago. Our growing expertise in these activities will aid our critical assessment of the changes taking place in children's play, learning, peer interaction and identity formation.

NOTES

1. See Schwartzman's *Transformations* (1978) for a thorough look at anthropological play scholarship until that period.

2. I refer to a commonly-articulated perception I have encountered in my research among Palestinian and Israeli residents of Jerusalem as well as in casual conversations elsewhere, rather than identifying a complete historical transition in this or other milieus. Jerusalemites consulted about the popular pastimes of children and teens since the 1940s expressed the cliché that for youth today the computer has replaced the pastimes of their parents and grandparents. Concurrently, however, the children and teens consulted in this research continue to exhibit traditional knowledge, for instance of certain games, lore and plants, even as they engage in more mediated digital activities such as cell phone, video and computer games.

3. http://www.nostal.co.il/

4. See McDowell 1983.

5. The "first academic, peer-reviewed (online) journal dedicated to computer game research" (Raessens 2006, 52)

6. Approaching the far left end of the spectrum, where audience involvement with the performer becomes increasingly vicarious, the genre or product of the performance displaces the performer and itself becomes the object of interaction.

7. See Levy and Croal 2006.

8. We may interpret this as demonstrating the prominence of digitally-mediated "dominating imaginative schemas" in the lives of an increasing number of children.

9. I would like to thank John McDowell for articulating these issues.

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