

"Sui" Genres: Mock Violence in an Urban School Yard

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During a year's field work in an urban working class, racially integrated, public elementary school yard in Pennsylvania, a type of popular children's game emerged that had been underreported in the folk play literature. Mock violent games, among both boys and girls, appeared as hitting, pushing and slamming games, ranging in violence from the overt, although playful, to the covert. The non-violent violent handball game of "Suicide" will be examined in detail in this paper, and it will be argued that the hybridity of the game reflects its paradoxical status as mixt genre and unique cultural marker.

The genre of mock violent games includes a range of other classic folk game genres: wrestling games, tagging games, and handball games. One could argue, given the emotional charge of mock violent play, that any game from any genre could become mock violent. Genre here is, as Ben-Amos phrased it, a "conceptual category of communication, not classification" (1976). With this in mind, if we extend Sutton-Smith's notion of play fighting as custom and stylized communication, (1973, 1980), we can then examine the larger tensions in the play fighting and seek to understand its mixed messages within the school context. It will be argued that mock violent games, here seen as hybrid forms of varying complexity, need to be examined not only in terms of their mixed history, but in their overlapping physical locations.

Games of the body, with the exception of clapping, tagging, and stepping games, have been virtually ignored in the canons of American children's folklore (Bronner, 1988; Knapp and Knapp, 1976; Newell, 1963; Jones and Lomax Hawes, 1972), and their absence reflects both a romanticism in many children's lore collections, and the limitations of orally-based field recording. This fieldwork was performed in the full 1991-1992 school year and involved extensive videotaping of children's spontaneous play in the recess school yard, and the presentation of these videotapes back to the participants for their native commentary. One hundred and four third, fourth, and fifth grade boys and girls were observed, audiotaped, and videotaped during recess. Forty-seven children served as native experts, including Tim, Paulo, Wahid and their friends.

Mock Violent Games as a Genre

First it seems wise to clarify what we mean by "mock" violent games. The animal play literature of Aldis (1975) and Bertrand (1976), and the rough-and-tumble literature of Blurton-Jones, and also Pellegrini, and Boulton and P.K. Smith have made the case for mock violence being clearly distinct from real violent action (Blurton-Jones, 1976; Pellegrini, 1987, 1988, 1989; Boulton and P.K. Smith, 1989; Hartup and Laursen, in press). In general when animals or humans are playing mock violently, the actors stay together after the bout is over, and as Goffman and Kendon have noted, the face is visible and in the mode of presentation (Goffman, 1963, 1967; Kendon, 1990). In real violence, eye contact is brief, if at all; one actor retreats, and the participants separate. This is not to say that real bruises do not occur over mock violent play, but as my own observations have confirmed, the two are, in general, distinct and distinguishable. As Gregory Bateson framed it, "the nip connotes the bite, but not what the bite connotes" (Bateson, 1955). The distinction is necessary as adult perceptions of violence have been utilized for the control of children's play and the elimination of recess periods at this school in the 1990-1991, and 1992-1993 school years.

Hybrid Forms

A case will be made for the examination of mock violent games as constituting its own momentary hybrid genre. Two games that I will mention by way of introduction are "The Fighting Game" and "Slap Boxing." In this way we can begin to tease apart what is meant by hybridity and point out its utility in game analysis.

"The Fighting Game" is a popular wrestling game, performed in a square of nine boxes, and the object for each of the two facing opponents is to push the other out of the square. Among some players at the school, when one person's foot was pushed outside the box, the other had won the round. Among others, especially third graders, you were still considered in the game as long as you hopped on one foot even if you were pushed "out." There is a simple hybridity here, but it is merely in the form. Although many wrestling forms use squares or rings as marked spaces, here the one place for the game was a space marked by nine boxes, and acknowledged by the children as created but not used for ball bouncing. The nine square ball box became synonymous with "The Fighting Game," and when "The Fighting Game" was asked about in indoor interview settings, inevitably a pretend nine square box was drawn.

Another example of a simple mixed form is visible in the game "Slap Boxing" where two players face each other and attempt to slap each other's face, while dancing like boxers, and often moving from one location to another. The first to slap or tap the face of the opponent five times is the winner. This was a favorite on line and in the hallways, and on the stairs, in transitional times and places. It was "tag" and it was "boxing." And like "The Fighting Game" it was confrontational, but playful, a mix of specific genres now forming a relatively new form, at least in this context.

So far these examples merely show the extension of what Gary Allen Fine called Newell's Paradox, where William Wells Newell noted that children were both conservative and inventive with their games, and may reflect the lively slipperiness of performance centered folklore collection in general. Abraham's "The Complex Relations of Simple Forms," in Ben-Amos's text *Folklore Genres* suggests that play forms are perhaps the most slippery in the range between what he called "conversational" and "fictive" genres (Abrahams, 1976). One might also wonder if people are more playful with their genres than earlier cannons would have us believe.

But the most interesting and significant use of the hybrid image is in the study of mixed genres that indeed are two different languages, as Bakhtin has suggested, two different stories being told in the same game, simultaneously (Bakhtin, 1981). It is here that we turn to the puzzle of Suicide.

"Sui"

Sui, or Suicide, is a handball game, most beloved by fourth and fifth grade European American and African American boys in this one school. The object is to throw a tennis ball hard at the wall, and have it return and intentionally touch a player. If someone is touched by the ball, or if the ball is caught one handed as a fly ball, the touched must run to the designated wall or base and shout "Sui." If you do not, or do not get there fast enough, you are at risk of "beating," or intentional slamming with the ball. As Tim, one sixth grader, told me during the first week of school, if you're collecting games, "you gotta have Sui." At the core of the discussion will be where the "suicide" is in a game that does not refer to any version of stylized death. Its mix of dramas within the game's form point to the utility of the examination of hybridity wherever pieces are missing from the tale.

Details of Sui include the shouting of "Relay" or "No Relay" where, if the touched person is far from the one with the ball, the ball may be relayed to another player who can then bean him. I was told you were not allowed to play "Sui" in gym, "cause you'd get suspended," yet the occasional bruises and hollers of "Suicide" were far less violent than the blood shed over

territory in basketball or over turn taking in any other traditional game form when the bell rang. If one was hit by the ball three times, also known as having been "threed," one was to submit to the punishment of "the tunnel" where hitting was overt, although the players all mentioned that doing the tunnel was not done at school. Sui was clearly the most popular boy's game next to basketball and football, and mentioning Sui to any third through sixth grader was like mentioning a favorite dish from the old country to a group of expatriates. "Sui, Sui, we know Sui." "I'm the best at Suicide."

There is a mystique to Sui, even to the adults who do not allow it in gym, in part due to the intentionality of trying to bean, or bruise someone, and in part, due to the power of the name. The child experts, male and female, were unable to explain the meaning of the game title, although one fifth grader offered that it is called that because if you play, "you're Suicide." It was typically played by fourth and fifth grade boys in a secluded alley way, between the school buildings. Its simpler cousin Wall Ball, a straight ball bouncing game led by individuals was often found on the perpendicular wall, in the public space of the school yard. Joe, a fifth grader, said Wall Ball is "like the same thing, but you just don't, just don't hit nobody in Wall Ball." The fifth graders, clearly the experts in the handball variations, noted that the younger children played Wall Ball, and that Sui was for the older ones. Paulo, a fifth grader said, "our class, all of us made up all the games."

Video Example: Suicide, May 11, 1992

Alley courtyard between buildings. 5 players, mostly fifth and fourth grade boys.

<u>Diagram</u>	<u>Time</u>	<u>Action</u>	<u>Voice</u>
<p>The diagram shows a vertical wall on the left side, labeled with the letters 'W', 'a', 'l', and 'l' stacked vertically. To the right of the wall, there are five arrows representing players. Two arrows are at the top, pointing left towards the wall. Three arrows are at the bottom, also pointing left towards the wall. The arrows are arranged in a staggered pattern, suggesting a line of players.</p>	10:33:27		
	10:33:31	B drops ball (it touched him, so he runs back to touch wall)	

10:33:36	A picks up ball	
10:33:41	A throws it at wall	
10:31:47	C catches it/throws it at wall	
10:33:54	Fumbles, D throws it at wall,	
10:34:03	B catches it/throws it at wall	
10:34:06	E catches it	
10:34: 11	E throws it at wall	
10:34: 17	B catches it. Throws it at wall	
10:34:21	E catches it	
10:34:26	Caught as fly ball, boy goes to touch wall	
10:34:25	T catches it and throws it high	
10:34:32	E catches it as fly ball. T tries to hide behind other boy sneaks to wall	
10:34:36	Throws it at T misses him hits wall	"Bean Him!"
10:34:38	T runs to wall	
10:34:49	Throws it hard to get C Hits him	"Sui!" slam

10:34:54 D throws it at wall E
10:34:56 goes after it, changes
direction Returns to
go get ball

10:35:13 Camera follows little guy
running out side door
through alley way, out to
main yard. Camera follows
him and films perpendicular
game of Wall Ball

W ← ← ←
a ← ←
1 ←
1

10:35:16 Ball is thrown high by one
boy standing in front near
wall, the crowd that is
catching is out of view

10:35:20 Boy who catches it in the
crowd comes to first boy's
place

10:35:26 **Boy stays there, throws
again**
(no one has caught ball
directly)

10:36:33 Boy throws again

When a group of fifth grade boys watched the first part of this clip in a small interview setting, the videotape was turned on and there was immediate laughter.

(--- Laughter, laughter, laughter!
--- Shhh.)

--- Hey, there go Big Joe, ya'll see Big Joe?
- No
--- Look at Big Joe.
--- There's Brian, there's Brian
- There go Brian.
ARB Is this Sui?
- Yeah
--- This all Sui.
--- See Wahid missed the ball, see him running for the base?
ARB Yeah
-- Now he got the ball
---- There go Brian, he gonna throw it at him.
ARB Where' s the base?
--- See?
--- The base is the wall, you gotta call "Suicide"
- You gotta say "Sui"
--- See he ran to it after he touched the ball?
- See Brian didn't touch the wall yet so he can still get hit.
--- See Brian didn't touch the wall yet so he can still get hit. -
That's what I'm sayin'
---- You hit it and you ran. Oh me? I hit it?
--- You dropped it.
---- Where am I ?
--- You ain't on there; it's only Michael, Wahid, Paulo and Brian.
- Yeah
--- (giggles.)

For the third graders who were watchers of Sui, but never participants, their game was the simpler Wall Ball, with its simple authoritarian individual turn taking. One is up front and bouncing the ball off the wall, and someone in the group catches it, and then it is their turn up front. This is in direct contrast with Sui's shifting format of the one with the ball having power in the back, and the one up in front, at risk of multiple negative attention from those in the back.

This is not unlike the visible formats of third versus fifth grade classroom behavior in this one school, suggesting that Sui is in itself a parody of identification with adult authority, or perhaps of classroom participation itself. Although the "it" role is usually ambivalent, according to Gump and Sutton-Smith, here the "it" role is consistently negative (Gump and Sutton-Smith, 1971). No one brags about being it, or being hit in Suicide. The parallel drama in the classroom is also the ambivalence of being called on, or being

"it," having the classroom's eyes on you, especially if you are a fifth grade working class boy in this rather restrictive school. Here too, the power of peers to make you squirm or come to your aid is in a relayed, indirect form, from the back.

Bourdieu and Passeron argue that symbolic violence is typically reflective of institutional violence (1990), and one could argue that the drama of mock violent play in *Suicide* is a direct reflection of the constructed emotional violence in the fifth grade classrooms. Turner in his marvelously entitled: *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, wrote of symbolic ritual as the expression of conflict (Turner, 1982). The drama of the game, I would argue, is such a symbolic ritual in this rather restrictive authoritarian place, where the last minutes of recess were called "the worst part of school." This is not unlike the parallelisms found in game forms and in cultural communication patterns, such as Farrer's study of the Mescalero Apache tag, or studies of house and meals which can be said to be symbolically related to an entire ethos (Farrer, 1976).

"Sui" as Historically Hybrid

The puzzle of the name of Sui lends support to its being a game of indirect symbolic violence, yet the acceptance of such an explanation for the mock violent drama does not explain the name itself. It is here that the possibilities of historical hybridization enter.

Handball's history, according to Tylor dates back to the fourteenth century where it was "particularly suited to soldiers shut up in castle yards" (Tylor 69). Although handball variations, including Wall Ball and Step Ball, which were also found at the school, were readily found in Ferretti's and also Dargan and Zeitlin's collections of urban play, no mention was made in any collection of such a mock violent version as Sui (Ferretti, 1975; Dargan and Zeitlin, 1990).

In Brewster's 1953 text *American Non-Singing Games*, there is listed another Sui, S-o-o-e-y, the only other Sui I found in print. In "S-o-o-e-y," a stick and can game, one player is excluded and does not have his own can and all run to a designated base and yell "Soeey" very loudly and return and see who is the one excluded and left can-less. Referred to as an Eastern European game of "Sau Ball" or literally "Pig Ball," the initial drama had something to do with a farmer and a lost pig. The school is located in an area with a large Eastern European immigrant population, with Polish immigrants being perhaps the largest white ethnic group in the school.

But like the two simple examples of The Fighting Game and Slap Boxing, questions of the game's origin are interesting but tell us little of the

current meanings of the "S-u-i-cide." It points to the significance of utilizing both the theoretical tool of historical hybridity and its Bakhtinian cousin reversal, along side the magnifying lens of physical contextual reflection. In a sense the fact that the children called it both "Sui" and "Suicide" marked its double status as a mixed genre, a "double voiced" form that is both ball game and a death drama, school yard game and institutional game.

"Sui" Generis?

In conclusion, we need to examine to what extent hybrid genres are, like mock violent games, Sui Generis, at least for the analytical moment, for the communications systems of the children and the teachers are in a dynamic unique to the context. Secondly, since the connection of games to similar genres, and an examination of their uniqueness is necessary if comparative work is to be possible, it requires us to play our own hybrid game of layered emic conceptual analysis and etic conceptual reevaluation. It can be said that the paradox that performance centered hybrid study has stumbled upon is the uniqueness of things generic.

And lastly, the categorization of games layed out by the Opies, in *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, or by Caillois, in *Man, Play and Games*, must be challenged by each context, as we have shown, for mock violent games are one and many genres simultaneously. Many game collections simply avoid classification and return to the nineteenth-century alphabetized dictionary form initiated by Lady Gomme, or choose to organize by region, or whimsey, or both, in Schwartzman's classic, aptly named: *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children 's Play*. The hybrid genre thus not only teases us into examining the mixed messages within the place of study, a most useful pointer in understanding tension filled contexts, but also invites us to examine the messages encoded in our own sport of genre boxing.

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