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The play of research: What Creative Writing has to teach the academy

Abstract

Drawing on ideas and debates about the nature of play from neuroscience, animal studies, psychoanalysis, ludology and anthropology, this paper argues for the crucial role of play in improving our ability to create, innovate and contribute to the production of new knowledge and understanding. I consider the narrative interruption and sense of alterity demanded by play, in particular the importance of selfhood and the acquisition of worldly competence. I ask how institutions such as the modern university might enable, justify and benefit from playfulness.

Keywords: play, Creative Writing, research

Introduction

I became interested in theories of play as a result of my experience of becoming a parent in 2008, and my sudden immersion in the world of child's play, particularly during an extended period of parental leave. The experience caused me to contemplate the role of play in the formation of subjectivity and in the development and maintenance of human relationships. I began to read both scholarly and popular literature in the field. Several years later, I am still contemplating play, but my line of questioning now sits within the framework of higher education, and with the notion of play as integral to both Creative Writing and research. In this paper I survey the field of play studies, discuss the role of play in the fiction-writing process, and contemplate how a playful approach to knowledge and ideas might be considered as integral to research. Finally, I argue that the approach taken to research and to play in the Creative Writing discipline has much to offer researchers and research-policy across the university sector.

The field of play

It should be of no surprise that much of the scholarly work on play stems from the disciplines of education and psychology, and

particularly from those scholars involved with early childhood. Marina Warner's essay on toys, 'Out of an Old Toy Chest', surveys much of this material and concludes, rightly I think, that 'the question of the real haunts the psychology of play and through play, the theory of fantasy' (Warner 2009: 5). It strikes me immediately that the question of the real, and hence of fantasy, also haunts Creative Writing. In a very different way – but one closely related, as I will discuss later – it also lurks within the world of academic research. Marina Warner's interest is in 'the inner journey of a playing child' (6). This journey, she argues, takes place in relation to things that the child's 'games animate, and, particularly, in relation to sensory qualities of every kind – appealing to smell, touch, hearing, even taste, as well as sight' (6). She believes that it is the 'sensory appeal of such artefacts' that aims 'directly at perception to stimulate visualisations, and hence, cognitive knowledge' (5). It is no stretch to note, for later reference, that scientific instruments are merely technological means to extend our sensory capacities.

Physicality and materiality certainly interested the early nineteenth century educationalist Friedrich Froebel, who hit upon the term Kindergarten, or Garden for Children, to characterise his methods of teaching. Froebel's methods were grounded upon play that emphasised creativity and the 'constructive arts' (Liebschner 2001: 37). The garden in Froebel's kindergarten was 'an essential means for the physical, intellectual, social and emotional development of the child' (Liebschner 2001: 39). He saw play not so much as something to be tolerated, or something that should be used in service to education, but rather as a fundamental right for children, and an essential formative activity, something that instilled a 'natural gladness' and, in turn 'a fuller life' (45-6). Froebel's key focus was not so much on fantasies of narrative, as on self-activity, that is, on the child's own actions. Again, this emphasis on the concrete and the sensory, emphasising being and doing in the physical world, has a particular role in Creative Writing, and I want to come back to the meeting of inner and outer worlds later in this article.

The medieval historian Johan Huizinga is perhaps one of the most famous scholars of play, and he is regularly referenced in the literature. In the very title of his book *Homo ludens*, first published in 1938, Huizinga defines the human species as a playing animal. He defines play in the following terms:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted as binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'. (Huizinga 1955: 28)

Hence, Huizinga reads play primarily as *activity*. It takes place in demarcated zones and so requires rules that set up the illusory world of play in the first place. Much of his work fosters the idea that play is culturally sequestered. There exists in *Homo ludens*, and also in the

work of the later play theorist Roger Callois (*Man, play and games* 1958), a rigid dichotomy between play and the perceived ‘real’ or everyday world (which in today’s university we might read as the world characterised by the logical, the stable, the reasoned, the efficient, all these derived by a perceived scientific method). In this understanding, as Paul Carter argues, ‘knowledge and creativity are conceived as mutually exclusive’ and science and poetry both suffer for it (Carter 2004: 7). Such a Fordist/Taylorist approach to knowledge has us conceiving of new knowledge as something that can be assembled in a linear way, as on a production line, something that can be made more efficient by adjustments via technology or technique.

Some of the most interesting reading I have discovered on play comes from the field of anthropology, prompted in part by Clifford Geertz’s famous essay ‘Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese cockfight,’ published in 1973, and which many consider a ‘discipline-shaking’ piece of work (Malaby 2009). Geertz viewed the cockfight he described in his essay as a kind of vessel for meaning-making in Balinese culture: there was more at play here than material gain. Rather, ‘esteem, honor, dignity, respect’ (Geertz 1973: 433), were all fought and won over the dustbowl of the cockfighting ring. A productive connection between sociocultural anthropology and the humanities was forged via Geertz’s work, however ludologists now criticise Geertz for a ruthless focus on meaning-making, at the expense of the inherent indeterminacy of gaming. Another pair of anthropologists, Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, also writing in the 1970s, are significant for turning attention away from play as activity, and towards play as a disposition. As Thomas Malaby (2009) argues, this approach is still somewhat underdeveloped in the literature, but the focus here is very much on play as a state of experience, and is therefore of considerable interest to those involved in discovery-led research. Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett (1971) zoom in on the issue of possibility, or in other words, contingency, and they contrast this play state with states of anxiety (too much contingency) and boredom (too little). This concept is of some relevance, I shall argue later, to university research policy and management.

The popularity of digital and online gaming in recent years has attracted plenty of new scholarly attention, not just to games as a cultural practice, but also to the nature of play in the contemporary adult world. Scholars like David Golumbia champion the idea that play is not just an aid to development and attainment, as the early childhood development school would have it, but a crucial and ongoing experiment that helps us to ‘be’ in the world. Most of us would agree, albeit with a slight tint of romanticism, that the condition of childhood requires what Golumbia calls ‘a kind of unbounded, free play,’ one that has the capacity to exist both within and beyond a specific set of rules, or both within and outside of organised institutions (Golumbia 2009: 182). Child’s play, according to this understanding, can break its own rules and make up new rules frequently. It has been argued that it is this untameable aspect of play

in childhood that enables not just adult creativity but perhaps adult language and representation more broadly.

But Golumbia, rightly, reminds us that ‘what emerges as a hidden truth of computer gaming... is the human pleasure taken in the completing of activities with closure and hierarchical means of task measurement’ (Golumbia 2009: 192). In other words, there is an intriguing relationship, when we look at playful adults, between the perceptions of play as pleasurable because it involves freedom, and the comfort and necessity of rules and limitations in order to enable play. Again, this is an issue that seems particularly pertinent to Creative Writing, where form, genre and sub-genre might be thought of as loosely containing the set of rules or limitations that work to enable new invention.

The American neuroscientist Stuart Brown calls play ‘an altered state’, which interests me because of the way we associate altered states with drugs and alcohol, or meditation, or trance, but also because my own experience of immersion in the creative writing process feels very much like an altered state, or at least a mode of thinking/being that is splintered or detached from other, more normalised or cohesive understandings of time and selfhood. Interestingly, Brown arrived at the subject of play through a background in criminology, and the desire to test out the theory that a particular mass-murderer evolved into the person he became because he was denied opportunities to play during childhood. ‘The opposite of play is not work,’ says Brown, ‘it’s depression’ (Brown 2008).

Brown makes regular reference to ‘hard science’, saying things like: ‘nothing lights up the brain like play’ (Brown 2008). He cites experiments with rats or cats, and I picture these animals wired up, and I shift in my seat and wonder, not for the first time, about the ruthless stupidity of so-called hard science. For whom is it hard? It’s not difficult to guess the answer when Brown describes an experiment with a group of rats. Apparently rats are ‘hardwired’ (Brown’s metaphor) to know that the scent of a cat equals danger. When a cat’s collar is dropped into their cage, they run and hide. Such is the response of two separate groups of rats described in Brown’s experiment. One of these groups has previously been ‘allowed’ to play, and the other group has been ‘denied’ play. The difference between the two groups, Brown states matter-of-factly, is that the rats that have been allowed to play poke their heads out of their hiding places periodically, after the appearance of the cat’s collar. Eventually this group is able to assess that the danger has passed and they go back to their usual duties. The other rats, those ‘denied play’, never come out again. ‘They die in their bunkers,’ says Brown.

If we turn to scholarly work in the field of psychoanalysis, we come across one of the most famous observation-based theorisations of play: that posed by Freud (1920), after observing his grandson Ernst playing the game of ‘fort/da’ (here/gone) with a cotton reel on a piece of string. I have never offered my own son a cotton reel on a piece of

string, but I watched the same game, in principle, carried out by him repetitively around 18 months of age. As Freud saw it, this game of fort/da, the wilful manipulation of an object to make it disappear and reappear over and over again, is a game of mastery, converting the infant's hitherto passive role in relation to his mother into an active one. Freud understands the game as acting out an impulse 'suppressed in actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him'. He imagines the child's internal dialogue with the mother as one bound up in anger and frustration: *All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself.* But feminist commentators have questioned this interpretation for its emphasis on a struggle for power and mastery. Jay Watson, for example, reads the fort/da game as an engagement with the mother's subject position via exploration and experiment, rather than as an attempt to overcome her. 'Fort/da confirms that growing up is more than just a matter of learning to live at a distance from the mother,' writes Watson. 'It is also a matter of learning to do the kinds of things she can do' (Watson 1995: 483). Considering the play between presence and absence in a broader sense as the play between life and death, Elisabeth Bronfen (1989) argues that the key objective behind fort/da is more likely the development of infant subjectivity. Linking the absence of the mother's body to the threat of death, the game becomes an experiment in both submitting to and resisting death, enabling the emerging infant to develop a sense of subjectivity without being overwhelmed by the fear of death.

The finer points of the meaning and the purpose of the fort/da game are still much debated in the psychoanalytic literature, but for our purposes the point is clear: play is essential to the development of an understanding of the self, and that self's relation to the world, in an endless repetition and renegotiation that is never fully resolved. Further, that repetition and renegotiation is often characterised by joy.

Play and the fiction-writing process

For Hélène Cixous, who has written extensively on the writing process, the kind of empathetic identification that a writer needs to make when representing another constitutes an extraordinary pilgrimage into another self. Cixous' focus is on investigation and reflection. 'I become, I inhabit, I enter,' she writes. 'Inhabiting someone, at that moment, I can feel myself traversed by that person's initiatives and actions' (Cixous 1975: 148). As Cixous understands it, identification with the other is not about erasure, but rather about 'permeability' or a 'peopling' of the self. You inhabit and are inhabited by turn. Or as she puts it, 'one is always far more than one' (96). Writing, for Cixous, is the primary means by which we can engage in this to-and-fro. Indeed, the feminist reading of Freud's fort/da theory is that play between mother and infant engages precisely the same kind of alterity.

This sense of one's writing being 'peopled' by others was affirmed by some research conducted recently by Australian Creative Writing academic, Paul Magee (2009). Magee conducted a series of interviews with fourteen Australian poets. One of his interviewees, Jenny Harrison stated that when composing, 'it's almost as if you can inhabit both the subjective and objective positions at the same time'. Another, Alex Skovron, commented that, 'the writing is coming out of the writer, of course, yet in a strange way it also isn't' (Magee 2009).

In relation to fiction, it is instructive to look at the work of Wolfgang Iser in his 1993 publication, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. With this work, Iser sets aside his earlier preoccupations with reading, to offer a more general theory of what he calls literary anthropology. For Iser, 'fictions are attempts by human beings to give form to themselves which reveal in the process that human beings have no definitive form' (Armstrong 2000: 212). We work therefore, in a paradox, but an essential one. Iser's approach encapsulates, for me, something of the way fiction can move simultaneously both towards and away from knowledge. And why, too, it is difficult to list your intentions with a work of fiction as a list of clearly 'do-able' or measurable objectives, in the same way we might more easily manage with a plan for analytical or critical research. I imagine myself at one end of a long table in a grey boardroom. At the other end is the Director of the Research Office, in a dark suit asking, *What is your central research question?* I stare back bravely, and say, *Well, it's to undo precisely everything it's setting out to do. Or rather, to make visible the undoing of anything that's ever been done, by myself or by others.*

Not unlike Hélène Cixous, Iser describes the act of fictionalising as a crossing of boundaries: it crosses 'the boundaries both of what it organises (external reality) and of what it converts into a gestalt (the diffuseness of the imaginary)' (Armstrong 2000: 3). The old opposition between fiction and reality is inadequate and misleading, in Iser's view. Rather, the task is to 'elucidate relations' (4) and this is where the concept of play is helpful. For Iser 'the interplay between the fictive and the imaginary takes on profound anthropological implications' (Iser 1993: 236). Play is built on oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, a notion Iser borrows from Hans-Georg Gadamer, who writes:

"If we examine how the word 'play' is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is a to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end ... rather, it renews itself in constant repetition." (Gadamer cited in Iser 1993: 237)

I want to come back to this issue of to and fro, and of constant oscillation independent of a clear objective, in the next section of this

article. The point to underline at this stage is that it seems clear that the fiction-writing process is immersed, by necessity, in play. Further, the Creative Writing discipline is widely acknowledged as a slightly 'unusual' instance of research in the academy because of this engagement. But how different is it, really?

Research in the broader university sector

Play, in fact, is at the heart of any research process. It is the seed that germinates an idea. Further, it gives birth to the energy and excitement of experimentation that propels and sustains a researcher through a gruelling and often lengthy research process. As a disposition, it also has a role to play in reading or interpreting research. And, as Gadamer has reminded us, it is essentially an oscillating and self-propelling activity, one without any clear end.

In an essay about play as it relates to the parenting journey, published in *Griffith Review* in 2011, I describe a game I play with my infant son not long after his first birthday. It is a joyful game to do with repetition and movement, and I think it is useful to revisit it here. The game involves us dropping a tennis ball down the garden steps, tracing its journey, then pursuing and recapturing it before returning to the top of the steps and beginning the cycle anew. I am closely involved because of the boy's inability to negotiate the steps on his own. So, side-by-side, we watch the ball's trajectory. It is never the same pathway twice. We descend the steps hand-in-hand and I stand by as he scrambles into the bush after the ball, then wait to hold his hand again for the ascent. We count the steps together, one through eight, or repeat the monosyllabic word *up, up, up*. At the top, he releases the ball again. It is curious how involved I become in this game, even taking comfort in the pattern of variation versus surety: the haphazard pattern of the ball's descent, the predictability of our progress through the cycle; the always tenuous grip of the boy's feet on the stairs, the ease with which we both begin again. There is barely any need for words. This play transports us both. It could be said to work on a hypothesis, dare I say, a research question: what will happen when we drop a ball at the top of a short flight of stairs? The answer comes through movement, immersion, repetition, observation, reflection. The answer is *in* and *through* the doing, the ball's trajectory and our intervention in it composes both a work of art and the *possibility* of new knowledge. Any findings or conclusions we might make as a result of this research seem initially reductionist, by nature. Meaningful as such conclusions may be, they will only ever frame or read the research, they will not fully capture the complexity, the wonder, the chaos and promiscuity that is inherent in the process itself. And yet, *without* reflection on such an experiment, how can we come close to understanding its beauty, its power, its meaning? Indeed the more deeply we reflect, the more complex our understanding of the lived experience.

It is useful to look back at this point to the likes of Froebel and

Montessori, and to their emphasis on the importance of tactile and material processes as precursors to cognitive knowledge. And it strikes me that my engagement with this experiment with my toddler on the stairs is very much akin with Ross Gibson's experience of encountering a striking work of art. 'Such works,' he writes, 'encourage you to understand how you and the world are in and of each other, how you and the world are constituent of each other and mutually obliged, how you and the world are implicated, therefore, not distanced' (Gibson 2011). There is a dual consciousness required here: 'Inside – but also outside – but also inside – inside but also outside – but also inside. The rhythm of this narrative acknowledgement is restless,' writes Gibson.

The routinisation of human experience that has accompanied the rise of modernity is very much a given. It is here to stay, and the university as a modern institution has established, and will go on proliferating, rules and regulations and guidelines and frameworks that seek to police or at least to influence the kinds of research that might be considered as 'useful' or having an 'impact' at a given cultural moment. This approach suits the Fordist/Taylorist approach to knowledge measurement and knowledge acquisition mentioned earlier. But the disposition of playfulness, and the sense of permeability and restlessness so crucial to creative practice, has much to offer everyone implicated in the game of research in the modern institution. For it is through creative practice that innovation, in the true sense of that word, is first glimpsed. It seems to me that research leading to new knowledge 'is marked by the legitimacy of its indeterminacy,' that is, 'like game-playing, its outcomes are supposed to be contingent' (Zagorin 2009) despite the claims to certainty that are required by various methods of research performance measurement.

Here, research in the contemporary institution has a problem. The modernist approach to research is deficient because it distances, obscures or blatantly excludes the essential component of play. Creative Writing academics understand this problem but the people who manage our research productivity do not. I believe that research policy makers and research managers in the modern university have much to learn by embracing and learning from creative arts research practice rather than distancing or excluding it from mainstream understandings of innovation and new knowledge. It is true that that there is something unreachable and perhaps strange about creativity and about play. 'The most irritating feature of play,' writes Robert Fagan, a biologist in the field of animal play, is that it 'taunts us with its inaccessibility. We feel that there is something behind it all, but we do not know, or have forgotten, how to see it' (Fagan cited in Sutton-Smith 1997: 72). And so one of the dangers of emphasising the importance of play as a Creative Writing academic is the risk of reinforcing the notion of the creative arts and artists as similarly inaccessible in the eyes of those dwelling in more traditional fields. And yet there are particular skills to be learnt in the way the creative arts negotiate discovery, through the oscillation of a number of

binaries: inside and outside, or distance and immersion, or objective and subjective, or plural and singular.

DW Winnicott noted that ‘no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality’ and that ‘relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience’ (cited in Brody 2001: 370). Winnicott later names this area of experience ‘potential space’ (Winnicott 1974) and it is interesting that he identifies both play space and creativity as pertaining to it. It seems to me that for the Creative Writing academic, but also perhaps for all researchers at some level, the intermediacy of such space is ever so, even as it IS challenged by a system that demands legitimacy. The struggles that arise from this dilemma of intermediacy (in an institutional sense) are multiple and significant. They can cripple and ostracise. Certainly they can play a critical part in Creative Writing academics leaving the system in exasperation.

And yet, if we go back to Winnicott’s enunciation of potential space, the striking aspect may well be his call to universality. It is not just creativity and play spaces he identifies as pertaining to potential space. It is also analytic space, again a key component of all kinds of research. Further, Winnicott underlines an interesting point about the origination of potential space, seeing it firmly initiated by ‘a (potential) physical or mental space between mother and infant’ (Ogden 1986: 203). It seems predictable and perhaps counterproductive at this point to draw a comparison between parenthood and the institution, researcher and infant. We risk infantilising, for example, the role of the researcher. But let me make that analogy for just long enough to make one observation: by far the most prominent criticism of contemporary parenthood is the tendency towards what is commonly known as ‘helicopter parenting.’ In our anxiety to measure and encourage every development, and protect our children from every potential risk, contemporary parents forget to provide the child with an opportunity to play by themselves. We forget *what?* We forget to leave the children unattended some of the time so as to have an opportunity to risk, to invent. We forget to give them time alone with the most basic of toys that require imaginative assembly, reconfiguration, so that they have the opportunity to create wondrous new worlds instead of passively consuming over-directed, over-packaged diversions. What are the implications of this for the next generation? And what are the implications, ergo, for a body of researchers whose institutions are so pre-occupied with performance measurement and the complexities of federal government reporting, that they forget to let their researchers out to play?

In fact, the way to encourage all researchers to develop playfulness – and hence foster innovation – is to extend those opportunities that take researchers away from their usual routines and institutions to do the kind of extended, deep immersive play within their discipline, that enables ‘flurries’ of activity and experimentation. I am thinking here particularly of Academic Study Leave programs, but also of ‘research days’ as we call them at my own university, that is, one weekday a week or 20% of workload cordoned off from the

mundane, routine-driven slog of teaching and administration. Visiting fellowships and residencies serve a similar role. Such opportunities enable researchers to go *somewhere else*, to daydream, to throw the metaphorical ball down the stairs and see where it leads them. They have been a tradition in academia for centuries, but almost every new round of enterprise bargaining at every tertiary institution in Australia in recent years has called into question the right for or wisdom of such leave as an integral and regular part of an academic's career trajectory. It is interesting that employees at the highly successful web-giant Google, whose reputation is built, in part, on an audacious capacity for innovation, are reportedly *required* to spend at least 10% of their working time, playing around with anything that interests them and with *no measurable outcome in mind* (Vise 2006: 22).

Crucially, university management and higher education policy makers need to recognise the value of, and sit more comfortably with, uncertainty, contingency, possibility if they are genuinely interested in fostering innovation in research. I often encourage my Creative Writing students to strive to produce new writing that sits between rules and their absence; this, I argue, is where the best and most original new work really comes to life. As Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett (1971) have suggested, where there exists too little contingency, boredom sets in, where there exists too much, we are plagued with anxiety. So universities, and the high-ranking public servants who make decisions about how to fund and control them, need in my view to loosen up a little on rules about measurement, metrics, conformity, performance, and think more about rules or guiding principles that are not only mutable, but genuinely strategic, spontaneous and adaptive.

Further, the approach Creative Writing academics take to creative production in their own discipline ought to serve as a model for others across the university sector regarding the practice of innovation and the centrality of play to the research process. Just as the Humanities has adopted and adapted elements of research methodology originating in the sciences, so too might the sciences and other research disciplines look across to the thriving Creative Writing discipline as an exemplar of alterity, restlessness, poeticism, possibility, non-knowledge.

This is by no means to argue for an absence of rules. The relation between the contingency and indeterminacy of the *play of research* is always going to be difficult to map. It is forever unfolding and emergent. It is different from discipline to discipline, from researcher to researcher, from project to project. It oscillates. I want to return to Iser, here, and to the observation that working in the 'potential space' of fiction can have us moving simultaneously both towards and away from knowledge, for it seems that despite (or perhaps because of) postmodernity's mammoth and well-argued project to call into question such tropes as objectivity, truth and knowledge, the government's (and hence the institution's) conceptual understanding of these mammoths has not faltered. We in Creative Writing need to re-educate and re-orient colleagues from across the disciplines, to

extend an argument that not only justifies our different approach towards and away from knowledge, but argues for the re-discovery of that approach – *the privileging of play* – right across the research sector.

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