The State of Play for the Human Species

Chris Bateman

*University of Bolton, Manchester, United Kingdom*
*and Laguna College of Art and Design, California, United States*

Email in connection with this paper: junk@ihobo.com

Award-winning game designer and acclaimed philosopher Dr Chris Bateman was the first person in the world to attain a doctorate in the aesthetics of play and games, and has worked on nearly fifty published games. His 'imaginative investigations' trilogy won praise from Mary Midgley, Kendall Walton, and Michael Moorcock. The first book, *Imaginary Games* (2011) examines imagination in games and art, asking if games can be art or whether all art is a kind of game. The second, *The Mythology of Evolution* (2012), explores the role of imagination in the sciences, asking if it possible to present the story of life without distorting it. The final book, *Chaos Ethics* (2014), considers the role of imagination in morality, and defends a concept of moral chaos. His latest book is the brief enquiry *Wikipedia Knows Nothing* (available as a free PDF), which claims that knowledge is best understood as a practice.
The State of Play for the Human Species

What is the state of play for humanity? A philosophical reflection upon the pre-historical development of animal imagination, and the meaning of play to our species.

Keywords: play, animal play, magic circle, imagination

The effect our species has had upon the planet that we live upon is so drastic and unprecedented that there has been a relatively recent consensus to name the epoch we live within ‘the Anthropocene’ (Steffen et al, 2011). This age, which is taken as beginning with the Industrial Revolution around 1800, broadly corresponds with what has been called ‘the invention of childhood’ (Cunningham, 2006), which perhaps begins slightly earlier with Rousseau’s (1762) novel *Emile*, a book that opens with the arguably prophetic warning that “everything degenerates in the hands of man” (ibid, p37). It seems worth asking, in the context of outlining a philosophical state of play, whether play has indeed degenerated in human hands, especially since Johan Huizinga’s (1938) famous treatment of the subject, and Roger Caillois’ (1958) response to it, seem to make that very argument for the decline of the play element in culture.

In asking whether play has degenerated, we perhaps ought to ask first where it has come from, and one answer to this question is that we have inherited it from other animals, from which our species has descended. We may have ‘invented’ childhood, but we did not invent play. So if play has degenerated in our hands, we might expect to find some pristine golden age of play among the animals, and it is far from clear that this is the case. What is comparatively clear, nonetheless, is that play has been around for far longer than we have. One way of exploring this idea is to consider the extended history and pre-history of play in terms of two kinds of continuity – the aesthetic motives of
play (Bateman, 2016a), being the biological underpinnings of play, and the lineages of play (Bateman, 2016b), being the practices that have been passed on from player to player (human or otherwise). Although it is crude to see this as dividing into the ‘nature’ and the ‘nurture’ of play, this is only because it is a gross simplification to pretend that anything divides so neatly into biology and culture. For culture arises from biological possibilities – and any animal’s biological possibilities are shaped by their cultural actualities. It would be naive to think that the peacock’s tail could have come about without a culture of display within which elaborate feathers acquired their meaning to other peafowl.

It is by identifying aesthetic motives for play in terms of emotions and the biological substrates that underpin them that I feel able to speculate about, say, the state of play in the Cambrian epoch. While it is untestable whether animals from this time played, since we cannot simply pop back in a time machine, if we take seriously Gordon Burghardt’s (2008) proposal that fish and ants have behaviours that could be called play, we have to at the very least accede that there was something like play at this time in our planet’s existence. Given the most basic needs of multi-cellular life, I do not believe it would be going too far out on a limb to suggest that the animals of the ‘Cambrian Explosion’ played in some thrill-seeking, or victory-pursuing fashion, even if these kinds of play are quite distant from what most play researchers today are typically interested in.

The situation becomes far more interesting with our cousins the wolves, and their descendants (and our companions) the dogs. These mammals possess a behaviour, a ‘play bow’ (Bekoff, 1977), fully extant today and putatively dating back to the first wolves some million years ago, that is used to entreat other related animals to play – and not merely conspecifics: a wolf cub can invite a hyaena to play by bowing, even
though the latter is more usually prey for the former! Here is the first expression of Huizinga’s ‘magic circle’ (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003), the conceptual space that is opened up for playing within whenever beings have the will to do so. Perhaps there were animals prior to the first wolves who had this way of declaring a ‘contract’ for play, but at the very least we can say this did not commence with our species.

What the wolves possessed a greater degree of than the creatures of the Cambrian, and what humans possess yet more of, is what can be called ‘imagination’ and, if we want to stretch this capacity back further, we could talk of premagination (Bateman, 2014), which could be taken all the way back to creatures as simple as amoeba. Imagination, I have claimed (Bateman, 2011), is a faculty with degrees, and it takes a certain degree of imagination to enter into a state of play with other animals, a state where the norms of conduct (such as, in the extreme case of a wolf cub playing with a hyaena, ‘I’m going to eat you!’) become suspended. The much vaunted case of suspending war to play football in the No Man’s Land of the Great War (Mason, 2014) could be argued to be an example of the continuity of the spontaneous ‘play contract’ into our species, and a case could certainly be made for the games Greek warriors staged in Olympia as well.

Humanity is, to our knowledge, the most imaginative species so far, notwithstanding the uncertainties of measuring the imagination of elephants and dolphins. Not only our vast panoply of games – which have blossomed in tremendous variety since the advent of the Anthropocene – but also our artworks and media in general can be counted as an outgrowth of imaginative play, once paintings, novels, movies and so forth are understand as parallel to (but more sophisticated than) children’s games of make-believe (Walton, 1990). In this respect, play has certainly not degenerated in humanity’s hands, but rather flourished in grand and magnificent
diversity. We have more ways of playing, more artefacts for playing, than any other species, and we have more of all these things at this time than ever before. This is a situation that only continues to grow and multiply with each passing year, as indeed is true of the number of humans on our planet.

What is less clear, and what indeed might be troubling to reflect upon at a time when the growth of technological prowess otherwise seems to be an unfettered boon for our species, is whether there is a risk of us being (as the songwriter Roger Waters put it) amused to death (Waters, 1992). I have endless admiration for the powers of art, play, and games that our species have developed, and continue to develop, but cannot help but be concerned that declaring our time ‘the Anthropocene’ is a tacit means of declaring victory, rather than admitting a very real risk of defeat. In at least one very important sense, we have indeed let play ‘degenerate’ in our hands: a great many of the other animals that were alive during the Holocene era that commenced approximately twelve millennia ago are either extinct, or on the verge of becoming so. It shall soon be too late for any animal to play with the brown hyaena; it is already too late for the Javan Tiger. The question of whether our imagination provides too easy an escape from our responsibilities as a species that has been granted unprecedented powers over the planet we all live upon is one that continues to play upon my mind.

References


Huizinga, Johan (1938). Homo Ludens: A Study Of The Play Element In Culture, Boston, Beacon Press.


