Critical Precis: Rhetorics of Play (Brian Sutton-Smith)

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This particular chapter in The Ambiguity of Play never deals with video games, and, from what I can tell from a quick skim of the book, it doesn’t seem like he deals with video games, period. Still, his investigation of play as it relates to the imagination still warrants investigation as to its connection to our discussion of video games.

There ought to be a list of distinctions (that the author himself makes) between the terms encompassed by the word “imaginary.”

- **Imagination**: This is a term used by many philosophers in a rationalistic sense, and not as how we view it today (which, in today’s usage, is often associated with kids playing make believe.) This is often associated with higher forms of “play,” such as problem solving and conducting empirical research.
- **Creativity**: This term refers to a quantitative variable in psychology.
- **Fancy**: This would be closest to our conception of our present day usage of “imagination.” This word was also used frequently by philosophers such as Kant, Schiller, and Coleridge. In a nutshell, fancy would be actively tacking things on to each other in our mind in order to create something else, such as a unicorn (horse + horn = unicorn.) It was often associated with lower forms of “play,” such as children playing make-believe.
- **Flexibility**: This is often used when describing animals, but is way too limited of a term when dealing with the imaginary.
- **Imaginary**: The author chooses this term to encompass everything above.

The author notes that Cassirer, in Essay on Man, states that invention and personification is what is in common between art and play, and the area in which they differ is in the development of sensuous forms; in fact, the author states that this is restricted to the arts. He also recounts what Groos says about play and art within the field of psychology, which is that play is biology and play is culture. Most significant is Howard Gardner’s work in psychology, which sees play as a mastery of anxiety, self, and the world, and art as a mastery of symbolic systems.

The investigation of play as art, according to the author, is thus only rooted in the “romantic tradition” and not in any sort of empirical evidence that says otherwise.

The author also suggests that we can also view play as a sort of precursor to art, where play is a primordial form which is later represented as allegory. Imagine a session of make-believe between a group of children: the actual session of make-believe is play, while the retelling of the aforementioned make-believe session is an allegory.

Questions:

- Should we view games as a form of play that only occasionally produces within the player an impetus to create art?
- Compare games with other media, such as film, literature, television, etc. Pay attention to the presentation of such works. Are games art? That is, are games, as we play them (taking into account the experiential element), a sort of art, or are they simply another rule set that we play in?