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To cite this article: Mary Clare Martin (2016) The state of play: historical perspectives, International Journal of Play, 5:3, 329-339, DOI: [10.1080/21594937.2016.1244025](https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2016.1244025)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2016.1244025>



Published online: 17 Nov 2016.



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MEMORIES OF AND REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORIES OF PLAY

The state of play: historical perspectives

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Despite the exploding interest in the history of children, there has been limited academic research by historians into children's experiences of play in the past. Indeed, an unusually low number of papers were offered to a major social history conference dedicated to the theme in 2004.¹ Existing work tends to be fragmented, subsumed in more general overviews of specific time periods. The concept of play in historical contexts has yet to be fully interrogated in the depth afforded by, say, theorists of child development (Lindon, 2001, pp. 25–34). Manufactured play objects may be visually tempting, but in reality may reflect the interests and collecting habits of adults: indeed, 'toy' used to mean a trifle or small object until the late sixteenth century (Brown, 1996, p. 7). Imaginative play and play with natural objects are activities much harder to document, yet may be more representative of real children's experiences. Sub-disciplines such as youth work and playwork have a track record of publishing some historical work, but mainly within the parameters of practice-based research (Gilchrist, Jeffs, & Spence, 2001 onwards) and Newstead (2014).

Play as a concept raises the dichotomy of the nature/nurture debate. Play can be regarded as an innate evolutionary mechanism which enables the young to learn about the world and to practise skills which will be needed for adulthood, as with animals play-fighting (Huizinga, 1949/1970, pp. 110–111). Alternatively, its forms can be perceived as a consequence of social conditioning, shaped by the needs and *habitus* of different societies. Child development theorists argue that play is the 'work' of a child, a way of distinguishing children from adults (Thomas, 1989, p. 58). Johannes Huizinga (1949/1970, p. 19) in *Homo Ludens*, the first cultural history of play, defined play as encompassing all aspects of life: 'In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action.'

This raises the thorny issue of definition. Morgan Leichter-Saxby (2016, p. 111) recently noted how in 'Playwork Principles' (2005), play is defined as 'freely chosen, self-directed and intrinsically motivated' and playworkers would not consider adult-directed activities as play. In historical context, such a definition might be regarded as too restrictive. Where is the boundary between 'freely chosen' and children's incorporation of learned cultural behaviours into their apparently self-chosen activities, as analysed by theorist Lev Vygotsky? When children engage in behaviours such as play-fighting, are these socially or biologically determined, and if the latter, why do these forms vary across space and time? Moreover, the view that there is a sharp distinction between children's play and

the intentions of adults neglects the possibility of agency in play. An historical perspective can contextualise play activities within differing social conditions, and provide a lens through which to analyse how play may have an impact on adult society.

This overview will first briefly explore the contributions of academic disciplines or sub-disciplines outside history to furthering understanding of play in the past. While the expertise of the author is rooted in British history, I have attempted to survey a more global field. In order to highlight some of the issues with interpreting ‘grand narratives’, I will then engage with two major overviews of the topic: the classic, if much criticised work of Philippe Ariès, and the chapter, ‘Play, games and toys’, by Gary Cross in a comprehensive recent overview of the history of children, *The Routledge history of childhood in the western world* (2013), edited by Paula Fass. After examining key themes which emerge from these overviews, namely rites and rituals, toys and space and freedom, my overview will then examine the relationships between play and concepts such as class, gender, race and disability, which have been influential in social history. Throughout, it will draw on the work of the Centre for the Study of Play and Recreation at the University of Greenwich, U.K., ending with the ‘Multi-Cultural Toys’ project. Launched in 2011, the Centre has held annual or bi-annual interdisciplinary workshops and conferences, with a strong historical underpinning, on subjects as diverse as ‘Religion and Play’ (2012), ‘Play, Toys, War and Conflict’ (2014), ‘Re-imagining the Child’ (2015), and ‘Histories of Child Health and Wellbeing’ (Murphy, 2015, 1).

Much ink has been spilt on the difficulties of researching childhood. Despite all the criticisms of Philippe Ariès for relying on visual and material culture (Heywood, 2001, pp. 11–20; 2010, pp. 345–64; Orme, 2001, p. 5), many scholars have used similar sources to challenge his arguments, whether on paintings, sculpture, or as regards museums. Yet, many types of archives are under-used. In contrast to the grand narratives which have dominated the field, some of the best work is barely known. Keith Thomas’s essay, ‘Childhood in early modern England’ (1989) in a festschrift for the Opies, is solidly grounded in archival research, and challenges many of the paradigms which are still circulating in 2016. A key aspect of his argument, drawing on court records, is children’s disruptive effect on adult society (Thomas, 1989, pp. 52–57). Parliamentary papers such as Select Committees (1834) and the Children’s Employment Commission (1842) reflect the views of ‘experts’, whether educators, doctors, or employers on children and play. Children’s drawings have been a recent source for research on children in wartime or of times of crisis, for example, in the Spanish Civil War (Geist, Carroll & Coles, 2002) (and see also Nicholas Stargardt, 2006). Although perspectives on children’s experiences of play can be mined from a range of sources, including the writing of adults, many have relied on newspapers, magazines, and in general, representations of play and toys in printed sources (Cross, 1997).

Multi-disciplinary approaches

Archaeologists have noted the difficulties in recovering or interpreting past play experiences. One problem, as Sally Crawford (1999, pp. 29–32) noted, is whether small objects found in graves – in Anglo-Saxon England, for example – were simply miniatures or amulets. Yet, wooden teenage dolls found in graves have been thought to represent

coming-of-age rituals (Rawson, 2003, p. 128). More recent excavations have revealed (for example) children's toys in Manchester parks (Colton, 2016, pp. 266–267). The discipline has more to offer than isolated objects. Carenza Lewis (2009, pp. 86–108) analysed the layout of an entire medieval village to identify children's play spaces in the Middle Ages.

By tracing children's play patterns in the twenty-first century, anthropologists can provide insights into children's games in the past. Jean-Paul Rossie (2013, p. 278) identified how boys in sub-Saharan Africa make clay animals following models which are 3000 years old. Palm nuts were used as dolls over three generations in the Sudan up to the 1930s (Powell-Cotton Museum, Quex Park, UK) and in New Guinea in the 1980s (Marshall, 2013). Folklore and playlore may also unearth practices with a long history. The ground-breaking folklorists, the Opies (1959, 1969) identified rhymes in the 1950s which dated back to the seventeenth century at least. Recent work in Australia has also unearthed children's playlore (Davey, Darian-Smith, & Pascoe, 2013, pp. 40–54). The 'spatial turn' also owes much to cultural geographers, such as Skelton and Valentine (1998).

Child psychologists have developed complex theories of play, drawing on psychodynamic theory, behaviourism, social interactionism, and scaffolding. Bob Hughes, for example, provided a typology of 11 types of play (cited in Lindon, 2001, pp. 42–43). The case study *Dibs: In search of self* showcased the effectiveness of play therapy with a five-year-old (Axline, 1971). Moreover, evolutionary biologists are taking an increased interest in children. Childhood is described as adaptive, as it occurs much earlier in human societies than in the animal world (Bjorklund and Pellegrini, 2000, cited in Smith, 2013).

Although the use of visual imagery has been much criticised, the history of art and material culture have made an invaluable contribution. Hennessy (2008, pp. 65–67) has shown how children at play are pictured in the margins of Byzantine manuscripts. The model of the 'Romantic child' derives from paintings of children playing and dancing, and genre painting. The Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood and other toy museums are a further valuable resource (Harris, 2013, pp. 222–239). In addition, recent exhibitions such as 'Small Worlds', the doll's house exhibition and conference, in the recently refurbished No. 1, Royal Crescent, Bath, U.K. (in November 2015), bring together enthusiasts for niche areas of collecting. Henrich (2014, pp. 133–146) has perceptively analysed what can be learnt about play of child migrants from exhibitions on migration in Australian museums.

Grand narratives

So, what have historians said about play? Philippe Ariès (1960/1973, p. 69), a member of the 'Annales School', is famous (or infamous) for his argument there was no 'idea' or *sentiment* of childhood during the Middle Ages. This was related to claims that children and adults played the same games, and wore the same type of clothes. Thus, Brueghel's painting *Children's Games* (1559), like others by the same artist, shows all ages mixing together, but this can of course be attributed to its being a form of genre painting depicting peasant life. Yet, if adults and children routinely mixed without a concept of childhood as a separate stage of life, why was the picture described as 'Children's Games', especially as on

closer examination many faces look adult? The complexities of such arguments are demonstrated by one of Ariès' key challengers, Nicholas Orme (2001, pp. 164–197), who included as evidence illustrations from manuscripts of children playing. Yet, a closer look at such images (as of a snowball fight) shows the difficulty of distinguishing between children or adults.

While Ariès' work has been criticised savagely (Orme, 2001, pp. 3–10; Pollock, 1983, pp. 1–12, 52–64), sociologists have developed his views, perceiving the wheel as coming full circle, as regards adult and child leisure activities. Neil Postman argued in 1982/1983 that television broke down the barriers between adults and children, which had been created by the printing press. Hunt and Frankenberg (1997, pp. 107–125) claimed that Disneyland exemplifies the modern habit of adults and children engaging in the same play activities.

Gary Cross's chronology (2013, p. 267) also reflects aspects of Ariès' argument, in tracing a shift from community-based activities to those more specifically focused on childhood. He claimed that 'until modern times, play was a periodic catharsis, associated with fairs and festivals rather than with childhood'. Yet, classicists appear to have reached quite different conclusions. Mark Golden (1993, p. 53) and Louise Pratt (2013, p. 228) noted the association of play with childhood in the Greek world, as the Greek word for child or *pais* resembles that for *paizein* (play). Pratt (2013, p. 228) noted children building and destroying sandcastles, while according to Golden (2016, pp. 13–14), the philosopher Plato attached great value to play. He argued that, left to themselves, children will devise their own games, but that this was dangerous for the *polis*, and ought to be controlled. In ancient Rome and Italy, Quintilian recommended learning through play from an early age (Rawson, 2003, pp. 127–131).

Rites and rituals

For Ariès (1960/1973, pp. 70–73), festivals and communal activities comprised important forms of community solidarity, encompassing all age groups. While he discerned an increasing emphasis on the role of youth from the seventeenth century onwards (Ariès, 1960/1973, pp. 73–76), many rituals in the ancient world focused on children and young people. *Arrephoroi*, maidens who served in the temple or served Artemis (Golden, 1993, pp. 74–76), were depicted playing with balls on terracotta pots. In ancient Rome, boys ran round the walls dressed in goatskins for the Lupercalia (Fraschetti, 1997, pp. 56–57). Shahar (1994, pp. 243–260) has argued that the Boy Bishop's feast in the Middle Ages, which embedded the tradition of misrule, highlighted the significance of the young. Like Keith Thomas, Gary Cross (2013, p. 268) also argues that much play was in the form of rituals and festivals, but that these became more class-specific over the seventeenth century, with the aristocracy withdrawing from popular festivals and creating their own social worlds, which in turn had little space for children's play. Cross's historiography focused on alleged shifts in the period of industrialisation, from community-based festivals, to play in a more privatised middle-class home. They included the claim that with industrialisation, time for leisure was reduced, though more specifically child-focused activities developed for the wealthy.

Toys

Ariès (1960/1973, pp. 68–70) argued that in the 1600s, toys were associated with the age range 0–4, but that older children’s playthings resembled those of adults. Yet, children were depicted playing with toys from ancient times. According to Gillian Clark (1994, p. 13), a standard sequence of images on Roman sarcophagi might depict the stages of life, including a babe in arms, then ‘a young child with a pet or a toy’, and then instruction. They had toys such as wheeled walking frames, hoops, and spinning tops as well as dolls (Rawson, 2003, pp. 127, 128, 131). Toy soldiers, manufactured in Germany, have also been found in archaeological digs in thirteenth-century London (Orme, 2001, p. 173). While the eighteenth century has been regarded as a period of consumer revolution in terms of the availability of objects (Plumb, 1975), Keith Thomas (1989, p. 46) noted how ‘far from the market in toys being an eighteenth-century novelty, we know that children’s dolls had been imported from abroad since the mid-Tudor period’.

Space and freedom

The recent focus on space and place also fosters grand narratives.² Sleight (2013, pp. 29–42) stressed young people’s agency in shaping public space in the newly founded city of Melbourne during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An overall twentieth-century story, though, has been to lament the loss of space for play, as echoed in the title of Mathew Thomson’s recent work (in 2013) on the ‘landscape of the child’ in post-war Britain, a sentiment particularly apparent in the conference in honour of Colin Ward in Cambridge in 2011.³ Indeed, photographs of children playing in slum streets are frequently a focus for nostalgia (Horn, 1997, pp. 12–17). Yet, for poor children in earlier centuries, outdoor play was a necessity, and they might be forced to stay outside their cramped homes in cold weather (Thompson, 1945/2008, pp. 41–42).

Thus, both Ariès and Cross adopt a teleological position in relation to play, despite the criticisms of Ariès’ work and the flowering of research on periods before the 1600s. The narrative of lost freedom over the twentieth century until the present is pervasive and would seem to call in question the concept of barriers between adulthood and childhood breaking down. If children have less freedom to play than 50 years ago, it would seem that they are both more dependent on adults for permission and transportation, but also less able to share adult spaces.

Class, gender, race, and disability

This section will suggest how new research might cast light on the varying intersections of class, gender, race, and disability, which have had a profound effect on social history. I will first focus on play in relation to social class and children in hospital in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Play schemes and toys have been regarded as tools for inculcating ‘middle-class values’, for example, in the fund-raising rhetoric, not only for the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street, London, but also in Norwich Children’s Hospital, U.K., the Children’s Hospital in Glasgow and in Boston in the U.S.A.. All of these claimed that children’s hospitals might provide a better environment than the middle-class home (Martin, 2010; Tanner, 2007, pp. 138–145). Toys were also embedded in

cross-class gift transactions, as in Canada, 1920–1950 (Hutchinson, 2014, pp. 462–484). However, child patients were capable of bringing their own cultures into the wards from home. Thus, Grace Carmichael (1991, pp. 33–35), a nurse in Melbourne in the 1890s, vividly described how Irish patients sang songs about whisky and the turf. Moreover, children might recall enjoying hospital, as in early twentieth-century Canada (Gleason, 2013, pp. 54–55), or at San Francisco children’s hospital (Martin, 2010). Play in hospitals was therefore the site of complex cross-class interactions which are more complex than discourses of control.

The view that childhood play was gendered, in Britain at least, has become almost orthodox (Davidoff & Hall, 2002, p. 363; Thomas, 1989, p. 50), yet is based on limited research. Thus Anthony Fletcher’s (2008, p. 308) overview of childhood – mainly pertaining to the upper classes – in England from 1600 to 1914 cited girls playing at funerals as examples of gender-differentiated play. Yet other sources show boys playing at funerals as well, or playing with tea sets, with adult approval (Bosanquet letters; Buxton, 1969, p. 91). Indeed, Nicholas Blundell cited a case example of 20 children, boys and girls, in 1712, at a doll’s funeral (Thomas, 1989, p. 52). Pictures of boys and girls in Great Ormond Street Hospital playing with Noah’s Arks, ‘without distinction of sex’, are also testimony to the possibility of un-gendered play activities (Martin, 2015a). It is time to move beyond insistence on rigid gender distinctions, and recognise areas of congruence.

The subject of disability and play has also been virtually ignored (Borsay & Dale, 2012). In *Out of sight*, a collection of oral histories, Steve Humphries and Pamela Gordon (1992, pp. 34–45) argued that in the early twentieth century, middle-class children had easier lives as they could play in their parents’ gardens, rather than being exposed to the jeers and taunts of children in the streets. Humphries does cite examples of middle-class children who might have been lonelier within their enclaves. Yet my essay (Martin, 2015b, pp. 136–154) showed that the large families and extensive grounds of middle- or upper-class families might provide opportunities for un-gendered outdoor play. Thus, Agnes Hunt (1949, pp. 7–8), born in the 1860s, later pioneer in the treatment of crippled children, described how when all her siblings played ice-hockey one winter, she was made a little sledge and played goalkeeper, though falling out many times. Thus, study of play can provide a way to challenge orthodoxies about adult society, such as that the ‘medical’ or ‘tragedy’ model of disability dominated in the nineteenth century.

Although the difficulties of locating the voices of Indigenous children are frequently recognised, and there is a dearth of material in English on play amongst Muslim, First Nations and Indigenous children, there is nevertheless a growing literature on the topic, some assisted by museum contexts. There is a well-established literature on the experiences of slave children in the American South, summarised by Mintz (2004, pp. 126–129). While play between white and black children might be used to humiliate slaves, slave children might also play games such as ‘slave auction’ which reinforced their sense of self-esteem. Morgan Leichter-Saxby (2016, p. 111) noted how an essay on pre-Civil War slave children described play as a way ‘children have made sense of, coped with and resisted dehumanizing situations in which they have been held captive’. Vasconcellos noted: ‘The historian and planter Edward Long noted that his slaves played *warri*, a West African game of chance that taught children the fundamentals of basic mathematics’ (2015, p. 62). Christy Jones’s essay on Assia Djebar in Algeria stressed the ‘relative’ freedom of movement, in the early twentieth century: ‘In the courtyard of the apartment

building, the little girls' play included ball playing, counting rhymes, hopscotch and swinging' (2010, p. 54). However, their father set spatial boundaries from early on, only allowing play in front garden of the courtyard.

The records of overseas missionaries also provide a means of exploring cross-cultural contacts through play (Martin, *in press*), despite the problems with interpreting the sources (Johnston, 2003). Although refracted through the European adults' perspectives, these show how missionaries' and Indigenous children might play together with rice, natural objects, or be involved in imaginary games. One missionary saw a Wanika doll in Africa which resembles the 'paddle dolls' described by Deborah Jaffe (2006, p. 26). David Pomfret (2016, pp. 86–89) discusses colonial children's parties and dressing up and racial mixing in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia. Thus, alongside the existing literature arguing that missionaries increasingly sought to segregate their own from Indigenous children, in regions such as the South Pacific, research shows some evidence of racial mixing elsewhere.

The Centre for the Study of Play and Recreation, University of Greenwich, U.K.

The remainder of this discussion will outline some of the work of the Centre for the Study of Play and Recreation at the University of Greenwich, U.K. The first of its kind in the U.K. to study play as an academic subject area, its main areas of interest are multi-disciplinary, with a very strong historical focus. The 'Multi-Cultural Toys' project, which is the most current, began with an exhibition and conference, co-organised with the Pollock's Toy Museum Trust. The experience of selecting and displaying items generated themes which shaped the conference, such as globalisation, or 'East meets West'. The conference was also underpinned by the principle that the same types of toys exist in different forms in different societies. Spin-offs from the conference include a special issue entitled 'Play, Toys and Memory in International Perspective', published in 2014. Three articles focused on life-story writing provided significant insights into play experiences in the mid-late twentieth century. Thus, John Smith (b. 1947) wrote about growing up in a new council estate in Grimsby, where his father made toys for him (Smith, 2014, p. 85), while Ewa Sidorenko recalled 'playing free' in 1970s Poland (Sidorenko, 2014, pp. 85–114). The favourite toy of Rania Hafez, who lived in Lebanon and the Emirates in the 1960s and 1970s, was a battery-operated air hostess, reflecting her experience of frequent flying, and her parents' wish to be 'modern' (Hafez, 2014, pp. 125–127). The next stage involves a film with children about their views on toys, and interviewing family members about their play experiences. Overall, the project has a contemporary purpose, as it aims to promote social cohesion through greater use of and access to a more diverse range of toys in retail outlets as well as settings for play.

Conclusion

The contributions from academic disciplines outside history not only enhance, but would seem to be essential to research on the history of play. Clearly, historians of play have been productive, with welcome essays beyond the European and Anglo-American contexts. Nevertheless, the existing 'grand narratives', whether from the 1960s or the 2010s, have

been called in question by the rich vein of research on the ancient world and the Middle Ages. Both Ariès and Cross tracked play developing from the early modern period from all-age to more individualised contexts. Overall, a more coherent narrative of play over the centuries would be of value to historians, other scholars and practitioners alike – particularly one which draws on archival sources to at least attempt to access children’s experiences. Even a small amount of new research can raise questions about established paradigms of the relationship between play, and factors of class, gender, disability, and race, as this essay demonstrates.

Notes

1. The annual conference of the Social History Society (U.K.) at the University of Leicester, in 2004.
2. In 2013, two major conferences were held on the ‘spatial turn’ by societies for the history of childhood, both the U.K.-based Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past in Grenada and the American-originating Society for the History of Childhood and Youth in Nottingham.
3. See, for example, the conference entitled ‘Colin Ward: Education, Culture and Environment’, Faculty of Education, Cambridge, March 2011.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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