

Towards and Away From a Philosophy of Play

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida's playful thinking about knowledge and meaning offers many rich opportunities for critique of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this article the problematisation of the theme of play in early education is taken up through a play with a Derridean deconstruction of the adult's role in play. Play is problematised as a narrowly defined and organised activity of childhood rationalised for its technical purposes. The child player is governed by techniques of knowing play that delimit claims to expertise in knowing what is (and is not) the nature and purpose of child's play. Derrida's play with Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) provides a different thinking of the revealing of the child's play. Playing with Derrida's play brings into play the question of the academic self as autobiographical player.

Play is not always to be thought of as frivolous or light-hearted activity for although it can undoubtedly contain these elements within itself, play has a very real and serious functional role in learning processes (Cook & Finlayson, 1999: 27).

The seriousness of play is not, it appears, a play at which a researcher and practitioner in Early Childhood Education (ECE) should laugh. In all seriousness then, the play of the child has emerged in contemporary Western ECE theory and practice as the child's scientifically revealed, productive being in the world. This article continues a problematisation of theoretical understandings of child's play taken up by (but not limited to) Cannella (1997), Sutton-Smith (1997), Ailwood (2003), and Anning *et al.* (2004).

The purpose of this article is to argue that the work of Jacques Derrida provides a philosophy of ECE (Early Childhood Education) with a motivation to play with the scientific rationalisation of the play of the child. Derrida encourages a reflection upon the truth of child's play; and a problematisation of what can be said to be known about childhood and play. What is known about childhood is not *known* in the sense of the purpose and meaning of being 'less than' or 'other than' an adult; rather what is known is assumed in the sense that such claims have meaning and purpose for humans who seek some sense of 'being in the world'.

This article draws upon contemporary critiques of play theory, including that of play as an important process, emphasising the theoretical construction of play as a technique of constituting and governing the nature of the child subject. The process of problematising play is, however, not to throw the player out with the play dough, rather it is to reveal, and play with, the character known, in this play, as the 'play expert'. The discussion looks to Derrida's play with deconstruction, *différance*, the Freudian play of *fort/da*, and the revealing of the child as a particular player. Derrida's

play disturbs a calm, calculated, measured gaze upon the child's play, to explore expressions and experiences of being that contrast with the ordering and controlling of a performative-oriented, technological society.

Play theory

A popular, yet increasingly contested, tenet of ECE developmental literature, philosophy and policy is that of play being the child's work (see for instance Anning *et al.*, 2004). To follow Ailwood (2003), that play would be a child's work, arguably delineates a relationship between play, child and society, which is not playful. Thus, to theorise play as work is a technique of social control and a means of transmitting assumptions and beliefs regarding the nature and purpose of childhood. The player as worker is a subject that can be shaped and modelled according to principles of work – input and output, control and efficiency. Furthermore, the child must work at being a child; with the adult as supervisor or manager.

Childhood then is a period of disorder to be increasingly ordered in a technological society (Ellul, 1964). Play, as work, is subject to the gaze of the theorist, and in the discipline of child development theory play has indeed become an intensely observed, classified and prescribed phenomenon.

There is commonality in the maintenance of assumptions regarding the importance of making childhood in some way better, and of seeking out the nature of the superchild based upon political, social, cultural and ideological assumptions. The “dominant Western view that children *need* play” (Ailwood, 2003: 289. Emphasis in original) to grow up as psychologically and physically healthy individuals – and hence ‘normal’ – legitimates the increased gaze upon the child's day-to-day experiences, without which children may not develop appropriate *competencies* for existence in an interconnected technologically-oriented consumer society.

The theme of holistic development has an important role to play in the child's ‘free’ play. The child's play is variously observed for its contribution to a whole, interconnected, developing child-oriented system (Davidson, 1989). In this way a knowledge of the child's work has become the play of those who claim to have some level of expertise in knowing childhood – claims that delimit those who can contribute to the body of knowledge regarding childhood and, in particular, early childhood education.

Perhaps determinations of the nature and purpose of pretend play, symbolic play, educational play and harmful play, in assuming the mantle of the child's work, strip play of many of the qualities that are expected and invested in play, in that play is not the child's work, but is the work of the expert who contributes the rules. The concept of free play, as Beverley Morris (2002) argues, is not free at all if the purpose of free play is predetermined, or colonised, by the adult. Furthermore, “it follows that an effort would be needed to ensure that the children achieve those [predetermined] results when playing with the materials” (Kuschner, 2001: 290). Here, the importance of play largely rejects the contexts within which play theory, and associated toys are deployed by individuals or groups in order to realise specific valued outcomes (Sutton-Smith, 1997) predominantly delimited by a technical rationality (Ellul, 1964).

Technical rationality extends to the notion that the process of play is the valued product of play, a further contested theme of contemporary ECE philosophy associated with the working player. Process is what is produced by a rationalised and technocratic view of the child's behaviour. Play as an art form has become play as a means, and the emphasis on process over product in play is a manifestation of this emphasis on technique.

Contemporary critiques, noted above, of the primacy of play reveal the predominant themes of the child's play, and problematise the deployment of the natural and transcendental child in the legitimisation of play as a process of work. It is argued that the classification and governance of good

and bad play emphasises that all social and cultural groups may not believe and/or accept that play is educational, yet many play experts appear reluctant to accept multiple perspectives on the purpose of play (Ailwood, 2003). Pedagogy of play is constructed through knowledge of play's nature and often the assumption of play's worth is the very indicator of the legitimacy of the sciences and associated pedagogies of play (Plotz, 2003).

Derrida's play with the technology of play – playing with expertise

Each child's play with the world is obscured by theories of the importance of the play of the child that render the child's play visible. The obscuring legitimates certain projects associated with the dominance of some social, political, cultural and economic groups over others; and appears to have the intention of reducing what can be said about the child's play by communities and families, and hence of reducing what can be played by children. The child's "quiet and microscopic movements" (Derrida, 2002b: 75) are obscured by attention to the loudest and largest movements. In constructing the playing child's nature and purpose for Western modes of consumer society, "... a certain technoscientific objectivity represses and forgets the question" (Derrida, 1991: 60). Neither the child nor the adult is in a position to engage with an institutionalised professionalism that commodifies a knowledge of play (Trifonas, 2004).

The professionalisation of ECE in Western nations represents the universal assumptions of the state as to what constitutes childhood, development and learning, at the expense of other forms of knowledge. Visions of the desired subject as autonomous and self-knowing are inherent within the model of appropriate development, and are generated using a particular child-centered language, which serves to describe the experiences of childhood and the responsibilities of adults in relation to children.

The contribution of humanism to the hegemony of the playing child has had a significant affect on what can be said about childhood, and upon the practices of child rearing. To follow Derrida, in particular, play theory can be regarded as "ways of emphasising and valorising particular human traits" and marginalising other human traits as less valuable in the progress of human societies (Peters & Burbules, 2004: 27). For Derrida then the task of writing is to problematise, as a play with, the notion of the fixed and singular subject (Peters & Burbules, 2004).

Inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and befriended by Levinas, Derrida has interrogated the humanist construction of the sovereign subject – its genealogy and its authorial functions – in his attempt to develop a science of writing which both deconstructs and moves beyond 'man' as the full presence of consciousness in being (Peters, 2004: 62).

Derrida's deconstruction is played out as a thinking about the world as difference and in this sense the thinking of play for Derrida would be the playing with play in its infinite forms, rather than the play of a form of play deployed to centre the meaning and nature of play. Derrida, playing with being and Being, removes the blinkers, whose presence has led to the forgetting of Being. This Heideggerian play with 'being' resonates through Derrida's play with play. Derrida (1991) accepts the task of troubling the exclusion of questions of what it is to play, by playing with the theme of *différance*. Derrida, in playing with *différance*, deconstructs hierarchies of authority to knowledge; however "... this does not necessarily mean new freedoms; it may also represent new dangers" (Peters & Burbules, 2004: 70).

If there is responsibility, if there is an ethical and free decision, responsibility and decision must, at a given moment, be discontinuous with the normative or the 'normal', not in their misrecognition of norms, not in their ignorance of a knowledge about norms - rather they must take a leap and welcome a sort of discontinuity, a heterogeneity in relation to the normative as such (Derrida, 2000c: 200).

Derrida requests a throwing away of the norm in order to "escape scientificity" and the ordering and consumption of knowledge through enhanced information storage systems and the regulation

of access to this information. Hence Derrida's deconstruction of educational theory has particular significance for thinking about theories of play and their claims to knowing the freedom of the child player. A Derridean deconstruction of play does not seek to reveal a final object to play with; it is a continuance – a continuance emphasised in Derrida's deconstruction of the complex autobiographical play of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922).

The play of *fort/da*

The different theories of child-play ... endeavour to conjecture the motives of children's play, though without placing any special stress on the 'economic' point of view, i.e. consideration of the attainment of pleasure (Freud, 1922: 11).

Freud's analysis of play reveals for Derrida a complex of recurrences that are symbolised by the game of recurring, *fort/da* that Freud observes his grandson Ernst playing. Briefly, Freud, establishes that the question of the pleasure principle and of the role of play in the child's development can be observed in the developing observations he makes in relation to Ernst's play. Initially Freud (1922: 12) observes that, "the child used all his toys only to play 'being gone' ... with them." The child's toys are scattered around the room, to be collected by the adults in his world. Associated with the game was the sound o-o-o-o that later is translated as German for gone: *fortstein*. Freud (1922: 13-14) surmises:

The answer will perhaps be forthcoming that the departure must be played as the necessary prelude to the joyful return, and that in this latter lay the true purpose of the game. As against this, however, there is the observation that the first act, the going away, was played by itself as a game and far more frequently than the whole drama with its joyful conclusion.

The conclusion was accompanied by Ernst's vocalising *Da* taken to signify 'there'. The child's initial o-o-o-o-ing of his toys enjoined child's play and parents' work in the "reassembling, of searching in order to bring back together" (Derrida, 1987: 309). Work and play are divided. However, from his cot, Ernst was then observed to play out a different sort of game, in which a spool with string attached was lowered from the curtained cot (o-o-o-o) and then hauled in (*da*). For Freud, Derrida suggests, the spool and string are the tools of the child's work, in a way, simply because they are not the child's toys. His work was not playing with his toys. "This was therefore the complete game, disappearance and return, the first act being the only one generally observed by the onlookers..." (Freud, 1922: 12).

With the spool, over the bedside, from behind the play's curtain, the child is working and playing. His is a play of the "complete game" that draws together work and play. However the child has devised the complete game, "at the moment when all the strings are brought back together, held in one hand, dispensing with the parents, with their work or play..." (Derrida, 1987: 309).

The question for Derrida is, however, also a question of the real psychoanalyst, and the real father (to Sophie) and grandfather (to Ernst). *Fort/da* is a characteristic, Derrida suggests, of Freud's writing the pleasure principle into theory. Freud abandons and distances his arguments, and himself, in the text, repeatedly: "I propose now to leave the obscure and gloomy theme of the traumatic neuroses and to study the way in which the psychic apparatus works in one of its earliest normal activities. I refer to the play of children" (Freud, 1922: 11).

Freud's designation of the complete game, as Derrida (1987: 313) suggests, "immediately implies: this, then, is the complete observation, and the complete interpretation of this game." Yet Derrida observes, in this claim of completion, Freud both acknowledging the incomplete, of the returning again, *and* revealing the completely of the incomplete. "And yet, that which thereby again becomes a revenant must, for the game to be complete, be thrown away again, indefatigably" (Derrida, 1987: 314).

The thesis loses its (assumed) shape. The play of Freud's writing "*can no longer be read solely as a theoretical argument, as a strictly theoretical speculation that tends to conclude*" (303) with a concluded psychoanalytic thesis. Just as the abnormal Ernst confounded his grandfather in his uses for a spool and string, by not playing trains as 'normal' boys would, the grandfather (and father of psychoanalysis) confounds the reader. Freud is, Derrida argues, writing himself in to the text as perturbed by aspects of his grandson's behaviour and, importantly perturbed by his relationships with his daughter, and son-in-law. Hence, Derrida takes *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* as a text that characterises an autobiographical quality of Freud's psychoanalysis. Derrida (1987: 303-304) writes:

The autobiography of the writing posits and deposits simultaneously, in the same movement, the psychoanalytic movement. It performs, and bets on that which gave its occasional chance. Which amounts [*revenant*] to saying in sum, (but who is speaking here?), I bet that this double *fort/da* cooperates, that this cooperation cooperates with initiating the psychoanalytic cause, with setting in motion the psychoanalytic 'movement,' even being it, even *being* it, in its being *itself*, in other words, in the singular structure of its tradition, I will say in the proper name of this 'science,' this 'movement,' this 'theoretical practice' which maintains a relation to its history like none other. A relation to the history of its writing and the writing of its history also. (Emphases in original)

For Derrida the autobiographical play of *fort/da* in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* is "a more or less living description of his [Freud's] own writing" (Derrida, 1987: 303). Freud does not claim his territory as familial territory. The relationship of grandfather and father to grandson and daughter is one that is nevertheless, Derrida argues, a playful secret in the failure to disguise, for the reader familiar to Freud, Freud's own relationships in the text. Derrida is attracted to this game, and the questions of the author and the subject that are mysteriously folded in Freud's responses to his grandson's play:

He recalls *himself*. Who and what? Who? Himself, of course. But we cannot know if this 'himself' can say 'myself'; and, even if it did say 'myself,' which me then would come to speak. The *fort:da* already would suffice to deprive us of any certainty on this subject. This is why, if a recourse and a massive recourse, to the autobiographical is necessary here, the recourse must be of a new kind. This text is autobiographical, but in a completely different way than has been believed up to now. First of all, the autobiographical does not overlap the auto-analytical without limit. Next, it demands a reconsideration of the entire *topos* of the *autos*. Finally, far from entrusting us to our familiar knowledge of what autobiography means, it institutes, with its own strange contract, a new theoretical and practical charter for any possible autobiography (Derrida, 1987: 322).

More than this then, Derrida's own autobiographical play with *fort/da* is also evident. Derrida claims his naivety, his partial(ity) and his "selective and motivated reading I am [and this is] repeating here" (Derrida, 1987: 303); pretending as if "I were interesting myself for the first time in the first time of the thing" (Derrida, 1987: 298). The imaginative play of Ernst, and of Freud, is now the imaginative play of Derrida, who suggests that maybe he has played this game before, and maybe it is a complete game, but that there is something to be gained in playing the game afresh, the returned game to be replayed. This is an ethical relationship to his writing, a writing that "remains fragmentary, oblique, elliptical, open – I hope – to surprise and to the return of other voices" (Derrida, 2000d: 217).

Freud's autobiography provides Derrida with the presencing of the game's incompleteness, of its *fort/da* as a playful and meaningful being in the world.

With him, without him, by him, or all at once. His is the same 'complete game' of the *fort/da*. Freud does with (without) the object of his text exactly what Ernst does with (without) his spool. And if the game is called complete on one side and the other, we have to envisage an eminently symbolic completion which itself would be formed by these two completions, and which therefore would be incomplete in each of its pieces, and consequently would be completely incomplete when the two incompletenesses, related and joined the one to the other, start to multiply themselves, supplementing each other without completing each other (Derrida, 1987: 320).

The economic outcome for Derrida is then the contract of autobiographical incompleteness. A commitment to the play with, and within the text; the decentring of the subject, the derailing of the train of analytic thought, and the problematising of truth as an autobiographical “performance” (322). Continuing the autobiographical play, Derrida (299) invites the reader to “get lost” – yet not “right away” – in the eternal play of *fort/da*. He hopes perhaps to give the reader the spool, and allow the reader to get the spool lost, to lose the reader’s self, as Freud appeared to lose himself in the revealing of the game:

... I leave it to you to relate – to refold or to reapply – the content of the narrative to the scene of its writing, and to do so here for example, but elsewhere too, and this is only an example ... (306).

We are left to decide whether we want to open the curtain on the play of Freud’s written self, with the question: “Am I alone in hearing ...?” (307). This question is characteristic of Derrida’s reluctance to be interpreted as the reasoned philosopher. His interest in playing with play, and with autobiographies at play, is arguably a feature of Derrida’s *fort:da* with the questions of difference in thinking about the world – of the thinking about unthinking expressed in, for instance, Derrida’s shift from *fort/da* to *fort:da* and the different relationships of meaning such a transition might entail (the “sticking it to itself doubly” (316) of meaning; or the and/or of meaning?). Derrida (cited in Trifonas, 2004: 39) points out that for there to be “a principle of reason” upon which the premise of thinking is based; there must also be something beyond this principle. Trifonas explains:

There must be an archive, a body of knowledge, to work from, for, and against. It is at the inter-spaces of old and new knowledge constructions beyond the grasp of ‘meaning’ or ‘reason’ that risks are taken to move beyond what we already know by endeavouring to put the systematicity of what may appear to be grounded or static into motion, play, *kinesis* (40).

Fort/da is a play of and with meaning in terms of showing then hiding (Derrida, 1991). It is perhaps the child’s crossing out of being, moving around in and out of view as a play with being, getting a view of the horizon, and perhaps even a caring for the self in a caring for “the question of Being” (67). *Fort/da* is the play of difference, which is sensitive to difference and the playful exploration of the self – a decentring of the autobiographical in return, and in the distancing. However, Derrida (78) warns, in discussing Foucault’s relationship to Freud’s work, that *fort/da* can also be experienced as an “interminable, alternating movement” (78) between *fort* and *da*.

Rather than discouraging would-be victims of the pendulum’s trajectory, Derrida (1985a: 5) talks, in *Autobiography* of the power of the “borderline” between life(play) and work. Derrida points to Nietzsche as a living philosophical work in which the borderline is indistinct. Nietzsche (like a child?) “advances behind a plurality of masks or names that, like any mask and even any theory of the simulacrum, can propose and produce themselves only by returning a constant yield of protection, a surplus value in which one may still recognize the ruse of life” (Derrida, 1985a: 7).

Play is then a serious practice of thinking about being. However Derrida asks that we avoid gazing at the player as a centralised playing subject (Peters, 1997). Derrida asks for a wariness of such an understanding and what it might mean for the play of the child.

One could demonstrate that every time a philosophy and science claims to have constituted its own coherence in some fashion, it has in fact been led to reduce the element of play or to comprehend it by assigning it a place, to hem it in somehow ... In order to make apparent a play that is not comprehended in this philosophical or scientific space, one must think of play in another way (Derrida, 1985b: 69).

Derrida, following Nietzsche, argues for undetermined play. Play is for Derrida in the nowhere, of no particular structure, and of no particular use. Unthinking the child allows the child to be risky, to be many names. The mentor is encouraged to play with the undecidable, for: “If there is no ‘experience’ of the undecidable at the moment of decision, then the decision will be nothing but the mechanical application of a rule” (Derrida, 2000d: 232).

Unthinking, the child also opens up spaces for future interpretations (Derrida 1985b: 69). *Fort/da* encourages the mentor to play with negotiations of play. Derrida's questions contribute to a thinking of play and of early education. The writing of scenes and the pulling of strings are complicated, far too complicated to be rendered into the complete truths of play. The supplementing of our practices, the presencing of our play with children, is a "to be continued" (337). The importance is one of returning to questions again and again. Derrida is asking us to think and unthink the truth – the "fold back" (301). Derrida's play is a returning, a/to "fold back" (301), to look again, at the thing, as the onlooker, as the thing. How many times can we foldback and onlook? Many times, if we allow ourselves to get lost, to be undecided at the moment of decision. *Fort/da* is a thinking of the incomplete game, and as such provides a critique of the attempts to complete play. The *fort/da* is also a question of writing ourselves back into the play of education: education prior to industrialisation was "complex, lifelong and unplanned" (Illich, 1976: 29), and hence education was closely associated with being. Hence the *fort/da* of play is the revealing of play theory as a contemporary experience of *Gestell*.

A philosophy of early education, playing with Derrida's play with the *fort/da*, plays with the practices of limiting child's play through the limiting, or enframing (to use Heidegger's term), of the role of the adult in ensuring certain outcomes are played out in the play of the child. In Aotearoa New Zealand, outcomes of play are increasingly (pre)scripted in research and associated Government policy. In particular, the very purpose of early education is articulated as an assurance mechanism – assuring society that each and every child will be governed by the rule of play (yet couched in a discourse of sensitivity and diversity) and will in some way contribute to the nation's status as an innovative competitor on a global stage. The language of play experts and early childhood policy makers appears to value difference yet concomitantly prescribe the values, purposes, and regulation of play and play spaces. Perhaps then the first act in the play of the early childhood professional is to play around with the increased surveillance and regulation of the profession – to throw away the professional, to see what comes back.

Conclusion

If we try rigidly to guarantee ... [the rights of childhood] by appeal to something essential about the nature of children then our children face a danger. If we have a rigid definition of 'infancy', 'childhood', 'boy', 'girl', 'child', we will make doctors, psychologists, priests, scientists and philosophers very happy (Ghiradelli Jr., 2000: 205).

In claiming that play is a technology that governs both the child and the adult, this article argues that it is important to think differently about play, and that thinking of play as a technology is an important aspect of this thinking. The playing child is a largely unproblematised tenet that governs a contemporary experience of human being in the world. The child's play is associated with the shared freedom and progression of all members of the global economy and the information age. Should a philosophy of early education then be asking questions regarding what constitutes play, education, and freedom? Should a philosophy of early education trouble axioms such as 'play is a child's work'?

A deconstruction of theories of the child's play provides a critique of the techniques of classifying and regulating children and adults. From this deconstruction those interested in questioning the nature of education, of play, of childhood, of being in the world are encouraged to explore the matrix of relationships that are in flux around both the child and the adult. A thinking about our being in the world gains purchase through a thinking about the child's playing in the world, in which we play our selves *into* play, in a problematisation of claims to the truth of the nature of the player.

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