Play in research? Yes, it is "proper" practice

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: *Keywords:* Value Rhetorics higher education Research Playfulness play	Playful practices can be viewed with suspicion within Higher Education, as not "proper" practice. This paper reports on research that show how practitioners engage in playful research practices, and why they use play for scholarship and research. It shows some of the challenges that could be embraced to enable the increased legitimisation of play and playfulness as serious research.

In 2018 I ran a workshop on playful learning at an esteemed, research-led university. The event was well-attended and received, however a number of participants confided that some colleagues had not attended for fear of undermining their academic reputation. I would later find I was not alone in encountering this rejection of play as compatible with scholarship and research[i]. Such suspicion of play stems from entrenched rules and conventions that inform beliefs about 'proper' research; assuming that anything playful must be lacking in depth, validity and rigour. However, there are synergies between research and play that make them powerful and appropriate partners.

How do we decide what is proper or improper?

Research itself is a multifaceted concept and one which, like play, has no universal consensus about what it is and how best to do it. Its forms include scholarly enquiry, action research, practice-based, pure and applied research and span levels from undergraduate to postdoctoral. Like play practitioners[i], researchers have their favoured paradigms, philosophies and methods. Different traditions favour different things; one, a focus on replicability, validity, provability of hypotheses; another a significant contribution to new knowledge; others still a narrow and deep disquisition into a topic. Each may have its camps and alliances.

Depending on where the researcher situates themself their kind of research might feel 'proper' and other kinds 'improper'. Engagement in, and experiences of, research and play are shaped by passions, preferences, affiliations and even snobberies (quantitative versus qualitative? Funded by whom? Conducted at which university? Physical play? Competitive or collaborative? Cerebral? Team or solo?).

A selective process is at work therefore in the value judgements made about 'respected' research and a 'lesser' kind. Yet a fundamental tenet of well -designed research is that of using the approaches that most suit the subject. Kara is one who reminds us that while scientific research methods have become reified as *the way* to do things they were created *to address specific problems* (2015, p.18). We forget that they are not the only way, often due to these assumptions about right or wrong.

So why else might play be controversial in research practice? One problem is its name, which seems to have negative associations that other, terms, such as creativity, do not. Attempts to reclaim the term 'adult play' (Walsh, 2019; Whitton, forthcoming) have struggled as it has been hijacked by sexual connotations. Fears that the term playful activity indicates silliness often means that it still occurs in higher education but is called something else; exercise, activity, participatory engagement, simulation, scenario or anything which sounds more sensible.

> 'I think if you look at the features of good practice in HE, allowing voice and choice, freedom, sense of ownership of what's going on…exploratory non-linear routes through activities, that's all playful stuff but I wouldn't necessarily call it play to anyone I was talking to…[]I'd talk about participation and democracy.'

This blanking of play through terminology means that it is not always immediately clear where it is being used. Where research is actually into play, then of course it is named so, or where the explicit methodology and paradigm is centred on play.   The fact that play is seen as contentious for some in academia does not mean that play-based practices are not employed, but rather that they are more likely to be in discreet use. Numerous examples of their contribution to research are included in what follows, but first a word about the challenge of defining play.

Play: a slippery concept

This slipperiness may also influence how play is viewed, as often interpretation of what it is is somewhat narrow. Playfulness seems easier to define than play, often being conjured as an attitude or approach, or a "mood of frolicsomeness, lightheartedness, and wit" (Sutton- Smith, 1997, p. 147).

Play, however, is variously defined, with no universal consensus as to what constitutes it, and in fact some contradictions. In addition, how play differs from, and is important in, childhood to adulthood, is underappreciated (Whitton and Moseley, 2019). It is often associated with joyful, freely chosen activity which is sufficient unto itself and has no fixed purpose. Sutton-Smith's (1997) own extensive typology of

play forms extends far beyond familiar definitions of play as leisure and lightheartedness. He further recognizes – but does not endorse - the possibility of dark, disagreeable, meanspirited, or Machiavellian play; in contradiction to other play theorists (e.g. Bateson and Martin, 2013) who exclude hurtful activity play from any definition of play.

Sometimes play and creativity are conflated as terms, however while there are crossovers between them, they are not synonymous. It is perfectly possible to have one without the other. Perhaps they conjure different ideas about activity; for Gauntlett (2018, p. 21) the word 'creativity' relates 'to the activities of making which are rewarding to oneself and to others' (We will leave things like creative thinking or accounting to one side). Play, on the other hand, does not necessarily result in a made item and often does not. Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of play/fulness in research relates to the kind of behavioural and mental states that precede or accompany engagement. These might be the actions and movements of physical play or emotions such as elation through solving a puzzle or winning a game.

Conceptions of playful and creative research also differ in visibility. Creative research methods have been in use for some years and have achieved a level of acceptability, as seen in the work of Kara (2015) and Gauntlett (2007, 2018), among others. Disquiet about the word play may go some way to explain why references to research *into* play abound, while ones to *playful research* do not. Somehow, or perhaps, the notion of playful research is seen as lightweight or unworthy? Such a perception is one we will consider later in relation to the times play does not work. Next, let us pose these two questions.

Why do we play? Why do we research?

The reason for asking these questions is to point up from the outset some strong similarities between the two. We research *and* play in order to (among other things):

- advance knowledge
- speculate
- expand understanding
- learn from mistakes, overcome obstacles and improve
- as a process of discovery
- problem solve/face challenges
- achieve/meet needs/fill gaps
- as a process of discovery
- indulge our love of a subject and/or process

In addition to this list, we can add because it is fun and because it is something visceral and instinctive within us. You might feel that these fit more with a personal conception of play rather than research,

depending on what the research is and who is doing it. However, the conception of play as essential for physical and emotional survival (Sutton-Smith, 2017) has affinities with research which deals with fundamental, philosophical and material questions of human existence (such as why are we here? How do things work? How can I protect myself? What brings joy?).

Sicart is one who offers a universalising conception of play which mirrors the nature of research enquiry:

> 'To play is to be in the world.
>
> Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others.
>
> Play is a mode of being human.'
>
> (Miguel Sicart, 2017, p. 1)

Sicart's definition could also be rewritten with variants of the word 'research', rather than play, thus aligning the two activities further.

Already these notable synergies provide a basis on which to challenge any exclusion of play from research practice. I turn next to work which illustrates the extent to which play is already being used in research and is valued therein.

Some background to *The Value of Play in HE*

This project, funded by the Imagination Lab Foundation (https://imagilab.org/), has its roots in the growing field of enquiry into play for adult learning/in higher education. This includes my own work on playful and creative reflective practice (James & Brookfield, 2014), use of the LEGO® Serious Play® methodology for staff and educational development (e.g. James, 2015a, 2015b; Nerantzi & James, 2018, 2019) and collaborations concerning play and creativity. An early example of these was an experimental online magazine dedicated to play *Exploring Play in HE* (https://www.creativeacademic.uk/magazine.html) co-edited with Chrissi Nerantzi and Norman Jackson. Chrissi and I then co-edited an international compendium of practices: *The Power of Play in HE: Creativity in Tertiary Learning* (2019), which by January 2021 had been downloaded 23,000 times worldwide.

Many other collaborations and initiatives evidence increasing critical mass with regard to seeing play as legitimate academic practice[ii]. This has been reflected in the number of conferences, publications, events, courses, groups and discussions over the last six to eight years (James, 2019). Virtual and physical communities are being established within and across universities; The Playful University Club (Exeter), The Community of Playful Practices (City), the new and online Adult Play Network, and the Playful University Platform. The international Professors at Play network, hosted in the USA and launched in 2020, now has

almost 600 members. The US Play Coalition, founded in 2009, has supporting lifelong play as its overarching mission; akin to the UK-based Playful Learning Association. There are, of course, many groups dedicated to specific kinds of play, including several to support the use of LEGO® Serious Play® in higher education.

This upsurge in activity, together with my fascination with the inventiveness of playful educators and frustration at the dismissiveness sometimes manifested towards this, all informed the design of *The Value of Play in HE*.

Research design

The main objectives of *The Value of Play in HE* are to:

- extend knowledge of the ways in which play and playful learning are used across higher education disciplines
- dedicate a strand of enquiry to business, management and leadership contexts and any intersections with playful, creative and imaginative practice[iii]
- explore values and value systems at work in the use and perception of play in higher education
- revisit Sutton-Smith's Seven Rhetorics of Play (1997) and their relationship with play in higher education.[iv]

While research and scholarship are not explicitly named in these objectives, they feature repeatedly in data gathered from primary and secondary activity.

Data gathering

Originally the modes of data gathering for the research[v] were to be playful and participatory workshops. Inevitably, due to the coronavirus pandemic, these had to be replaced by a time-honoured, two-prong approach of primary and secondary enquiry. This constituted of a survey, interviews, supplemented by a range of play-based webinars and talks given to diverse audiences. In addition, I drew on a wide variety of texts on play and playing as phenomena, and on their use in higher education.

In order to harvest opinions and practices from a diverse international arena I extended an open invitation to participate through a 'gateway' survey, to raise awareness. This opened in January 2020 and attracted 112 respondents. In March 2021 I began to drill into the initial questions further; completing 60 semi-structured interviews with proponents of play in higher education; many of whom were identified through the survey.

Participants were asked broad questions about what had brought them to use play, what they did and how, the kinds of play they would still like to try, and how play related to their values as an educator/researcher/supporter of learning[vi]. They were also invited to comment on any negative aspects or

barriers to play in HE.

Respondents have come from numerous countries. Many are from the UK, and also Australia, Canada, USA, Portugal, China, Vietnam, Italy, Denmark, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia. Some record their places of work as 'too many to list' or 'global'. They perform a wide range of roles in their university and come from diverse disciplines including maths, engineering, art, education, management, journalism, fashion, sport, the sciences, medicine and many more.

Data analysis

A mixed coding approach is being adopted, which follows Saldana's position that "coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act" (2016, p. 4). This reflects the interpretivist lens through which I am viewing the data; drawing messages, patterns and meaning from the material; and relativist, in that play, like life, is a subjective experience.

Essentially the codes are of four types; thematic (drawn from the questions and key areas of enquiry), InVivo (to allow for participant voices), descriptive (e.g. with regard to play types and other practices and values coding (to pull out what was really important to participants).

Researcher role

As someone with a longstanding interest in play I could be accused of not being a dispassionate investigator. This is true, however my role is to gather and sort the data provided, not to influence the minds of participants. I am dealing with the perceptions of participants as to their experiences; this involves recognising and respecting that they will voice their own views and truths, which may be diverse and contradictory. As a result, my approach to this research is open and exploratory; it seeks not to 'prove' the value of playful research through number crunching and replicability, but rather to enrich understand of this through the collation of multiple play experiences and perspectives.

It should also be noted that while I seek to amplify knowledge and appreciation of play in HE, I am not a fan of *all play, always*[vii]. I am as much interested by the reasons why people do not play, as why they do. I was therefore open to receiving negative views of play. However, busy academics are unlikely to respond to a study about something they are not interested in. This no doubt explains the fact that all participants were motivated to use play in some form, while also aware of its detractors or certain downsides.

Emerging headlines

Coding and analysis

At the time of writing both survey responses and interviews have been through a first coding cycle and a second recoding is underway. As a result, the themes I share here are provisional and selective. However, they chime with a set of expectations I outlined when commencing the study[viii], relating to the inventiveness of play types being used, the reasons for negativity or resistance, the perceived benefits of play, and competing views as to what play is, and is for, at university. Unsurprisingly, the implications of Covid 19 for ways of playing at university is a preoccupation.

To date more than 40 codes have been identified, most of which reflect a powerful array of opposing opinions. They illustrate the ambiguity of play articulated by Sutton-Smith and underline the subjectivity and contextuality of play-based experiences. Competitive play, for example, can be seen as either an incentive or an unwanted pressure. Fantasy play can be a liberating means of stimulating imagination or a profoundly awkward and embarrassing trial.

Although unplanned, they group themselves comfortably as versus codes in terms of value and appropriacy. In their pairs each one sits at an end of the same spectrum e.g. 'proper' versus 'improper' research. Further examples include newness-tradition; fresh-boring; purpose-freedom; comfort-discomfort; trivial-serious, non-conformity-convention, standards-passion, resistance-acceptance, outside-embedded, risky-safe, inspiring-safe, leveller-divider. These represent important dichotomies which can all affect whether play is deemed compatible with research activity or not.

In terms of perceptions of the value and appropriacy of play for research the codes can be grouped into the following three categories:

1. How people play: examples of playful research practices
2. Why people use play for scholarship and research
3. When play won't work

Each of these are illustrated in the following sections.

How people play: examples of playful research practices

Research into play in all contexts takes different forms; two influences mentioned frequently by respondents were Brown's (2009) research into the relationship between play and antisocial behaviour and use of the LEGO® Serious Play® methodology (see also Bulmer, 2001; Roos & Victor, 2018; Nerantzi & James, 2018, 2019). The following examples come from mainly from study respondents, with additional references to wider literature/practice. In many cases value comes from a playful approach which encourages

participation. In others play is invaluable to research by catalysing ideas via unusual combinations; the marriage of incongruous partners, or the use of play in unexpected contexts. All examples are important because they make explicit the many ways in which play is already effectively integrated into research.

Play is used to

1. warm up research participants prior to engagement with sensitive or difficult issues.

2. unleash ideas about research possibilities.

3. analyse functions and processes (e.g. with cakes, foam and other materials).

4. create stories, analogies and metaphors:

   'The way I try to make sense of this world is usually through the Hero's adventure, Joseph Campbell's metaphor of answering the call, facing the trials and returning with honour.'

5. hone decision making and test consequences through game based learning.

6. inform doctoral research and in doctoral training programmes, e.g. through LEGO® Serious Play® as a data gathering mechanism. For example, Ajibade's use of the methodology to explore the experiences of Nigerian students making the transition into UK higher education (Ajibade & Hughes, 2020).

7. represent and experiment with 3D visualisations of data/findings/research hypotheses e.g. in Play-Doh, Fuzzy-Felt, LEGO® bricks or other materials.

8. visualise research projects, using icons, images and stories to clarify research goals or evoke the research project in thinking through making e.g. as an artwork.

9. inform evidence-based approaches.

10. to develop and practise research skills, learn about process, make decisions, navigate uncertainty (see also Elliott et al, forthcoming, on the value of game-based learning).

11. catalyse new research in free forms e.g. through festivals such as Counterplay (Poulsen et al, 2017) and musical improvisation (Nachmanovitch, 1990).

12. evaluate activity (see also Langan, 2019).

13. enable strategic culture shifting and exploration (for example Moseley on play and belonging).

14. stimulate different ideas, e.g. in the realm of design thinking:

    '…that's very much a playful endeavour where we're playing with wild ideas and we're talking about playing well with others and playing at the edge of what's acceptable to find something that is useful but novel for the organisation that they might not have thought of previously.'

Having compiled this list, we next need to consider what underpins the use of play.

Why people use play for scholarship and research

Their reasons sit at the heart of the argument in favour of play-related research. Respondents identify the benefits of playing in numerous ways, including the instrumental and the ineffable. The instrumental covers practical ways of conducting research, including the development of critical judgement; evaluating partial or misleading information; making decisions; reflecting on experience. Such adjustments of interpretation and action following new information are key features of play forms such as games and simulations. They underscore the linkage between play and research practices.

The ineffable relates to the intangible and inexpressible emanations of a play experience; emotion, connection and humanness: building rapport, gathering different perspectives, delving deep into questions of what it means to be in the world.

Despite the contribution qualitative research being widely recognised there is still a strong espousal of quantitative methods and of proving hypotheses. While these have their place, it is also essential that as researchers we find ways to explore things – through approaches such as play - we cannot see or articulate. This includes experiencing and benefiting from some aspects of brain activity that cannot be defined or measured, but which contribute to the quality of life. Gauntlett, in discussing the relationship between consciousness and brain operations, refers to 'qualia', or 'the unique subjective qualities of any experience, such as the redness of a flower, or the smell of a favourite meal, or feelings of love' (2007, p. 79). Proponents of play argue for valuing the intangible and inexpressible, over practices which prioritise the measurable.

Themes

Numerous themes emerge from the reasons why respondents use play and playfulness among them:

1. To critique the status quo

stemming from

- frustration or boredom with how things are, including the desire to fight against the "drudgery"[ix] that the academic life has become.

- wanting to reignite joy in learning/enquiry for their own sake.

- a determination to fight the formula – familiar 'recipes' for research conduct, the usual way of doing things.

Many respondents see themselves as challenging the accepted or tired norms and expectations that accompany these recipes. In rejecting them they also note the extent to which play deemed unusual in

their institution or field and argue that it should not be; pointing colleagues elsewhere who are using it successfully. One respondent noted that when their institution could see other (respected) users of playful approaches they had more confidence in experimenting with them.

2. As part of their personal and professional identity

Their play stance chimes with Sutton Smith's Rhetorics of Self and Identity, to be outlined in Table 1. Together with their opposition to hegemonic practices and beliefs play is a statement of self-conception as individuals and as professionals.

'I think this important connection between the personal and the collaborative and our own identity…a nice phrase comes to mind from Parker Palmer "reconnecting who we are with what we do". '

3. To re-energise practice and carve out new ways of thinking/seeing/discovering

Play allows participants to cross boundaries or juxtapose surreal or unusual combinations of elements, or to take activity out of its normal location and into unexpected ones. Diverse playful experiences are about deconstructing the familiar or questioning long and deeply held positions on things. They include chaotic and disruptive activities which may seem far-fetched or nonsensical but which challenge why we do what we do, in the way that we do it.

Some forms of play, such as games, emulate or draw on design thinking:

'It's sort of like game design driven research and design-based research and all these early approaches were designing objects, designing experiences designing things that you will then use to gather your empirical data.'

4. In recognition of the importance of multisensory approaches to research

This acknowledges Papert's (Harel & Papert, 1991) constructionist philosophy which argues that we learn best when we make things, thus creating both an item and new knowledge. It also emphasises the embodied nature of discovery.

'…there's more than just knowledge transfer, like words to someone's brain, it's also a sensory experience. …that your body is learning, different parts of your mind are learning, so when you put those all together then you have real comprehension. Play is learning on multiple dimensions.'

5. As liberation

These two responses illustrate the importance of play to avoid pre-determining outcomes in research or to over-influence /lead participants:

'To free individuals to be themselves and experiment and take risks and are to try something that different and that happens quite nicely with objects as well'[x]

'I think that play is something that you choose to enter into so I think you can practice playfully but I think when you decide to play, for me it's about saying ok I'm giving myself freedom to not define how this goes.'

This one underscores the notion of freedom with regard to judgement and appropriacy:

'when you play on your own or play with others you can create that new environment and that's the most exciting thing in play and there's no right or wrong about it'

Liberation can also be through the power of play to catalyse ideas. In the words of Pablo Picasso "Others have seen what is and asked why. I have seen what could be and asked why not. "[xi]

6. As connection: to ideas, to each other, to themselves, to the wider world

Sicart's view of play as an enabler of humanness (including as connection) cited earlier was echoed by numerous participants in this study, even though it was never shared with them. This points to play having existential import that adds to its weight.

Connection was also important 'to overcome stranger danger.' In qualitative research where people don't know each other.

'Sometimes the participants know each other sometimes they don't and most often the facilitator doesn't know the participants so right from the start there's a little bit of stranger danger or a closed feeling, or a lack of trust because people don't know each other'

Play also facilitates connection through social interaction:

'Some research on playful methods revealed that the strongest thing that came out was that students valued the social interaction that play creates- that probably is the essence of what I do…that is probably the essence of what I do, connect people and get them to open up to each other and connect with each other'

7. As expression of values

These notions of identity, connection, and others about humanness, approachability, honesty, and authenticity, come through repeatedly in observations about what play generates. They are also central to the values of respondents.

8. To make a difference

'One of my core values in life is making a difference and creativity and play enables you to do that in so many different ways'

9. In recognition of the impact of space and place

The locations for play are as diverse as the disciplines in which play takes place, physical and virtual. In many examples a dedicated play space or magic circle is created, while in others an ordinary space is appropriated. Fantasy or imaginative play can take place outdoors (e.g. Clarke and Witt, 2019) or playful outdoor spaces are created, such as Quercus Genius, (https://www.kent.ac.uk/creativecampus/projects/environmental/quercus - see also James & Brookfield, 2014). Indoor spaces may be ordinary ones appropriated for play, or specially created locations such as the Dark Would (Fisher & Gaydon, 2019) or the Play Tent from the University of Winchester Play and Creativity Festival. At this annual event (2017-19) all University members could engage in playful activity in a white tent in a green space. Along with games, art, craft, music, physical and quiet play the tent acted as an unusual home for usual classes and a base for research activity (a starting point for an experience investigating the relationship between walking and creativity). Festival participants noted the benefits in ways that echo many elements in this list.

The Festival was also important as providing a generative space for ideas. This is echoed by Mathias Poulsen, founder of the Counterplay Festival[xii] in Denmark, who describes his aim for the event as '…a matter of generating research on play. It's not very formalised and it probably shouldn't be, but it is a matter of creating a space where we can generate experiences that can sort of help understand play better'.

Many of these events and activities seek to create a space for enquiry which is safe and non-judgmental.

Gauntlett (2007, p. 134) refers to arguments

> … that behaving in 'play' mode offers creative possibilities because it emphasises freedom and plays down responsibility, self-consciousness and shame. The non-judgemental environment of play, it is claimed, is more likely to foster surprising and innovative ideas.

Reducing self-consciousness and shame and benefiting from a non-judgemental environment are all potent reasons to play. This is important given notable and increasing concern regarding the mental health of staff and students in universities. Another is that – depending on the context - research participants and students may be fearful or concerned about exposure, or about discussing difficult or sensitive issues, such as bullying and harassment.

10. Nurturing intuition and emotional intelligence

> 'As a safety net I try to make them understand that there are two sides [in research] that are important. One is factual analytics and the other one is your intuition. The big ideas in research always come from intuition…and this is where it is fascinating to watch students be extremely scared about it…scared they haven't got it, scared they won't know how to listen to it, wanting so much to cling on to the fact that it's going to prove how they do things.'

How do the Seven Rhetorics support the case for play-based, playful research?

The relationship between the Seven Rhetorics and play in higher education in general, as well as research specifically will have deeper scrutiny once analysis of all data is complete. The answer to this question is therefore currently under-developed, however it is already clear that they permeate all aspects of academia.

 The notion of a Rhetoric* resonates closely with conceptions of what constitutes real (traditional?) research and what does not. In his groundbreaking book *The Ambiguity of Play* Sutton-Smith defines Rhetorics as '… narratives that have the intent to persuade because there is some kind of gain for those who are successful in their persuasion' (1997, p. 16). The notions of intent and gain are important when we consider the narratives for and against the legitimacy of play in research. They also surface in arguments made for the validity and contribution of research, not least in funding bids, reports and post-hoc dissemination.

Each Rhetoric sets out the dominant beliefs and value systems that underpin a reading of play by play theorists within and across different disciplines. While they have distinct features, they also intermingle and have common ground; having also allegiances or connections with disciplinary positions, historic eras or schools of thought. All these aspects of the Rhetorics mirror the kinds of paradigms and positions that shape research enquiry more broadly.

In elaborating them Sutton-Smith also points to a potential jockeying for position; that by prioritising one form of play another other form is implicitly devalued (just as we saw with research at the start of this paper). Their explication is dense and complicated, with qualifying and contradictory elements. They are therefore difficult to summarise without oversimplifying or traducing the original framework; nonetheless I offer the following table to indicate where they align with play-related research.

Table 1. Features of the Rhetorics and their relevance for play in research

Rhetoric	Key features/association	Synergy with research
Progress	development, imitation, innovation, mastery, rehearsal for future, biological significance e.g. developing adaptability, in order to survive.	Research discovery as evolutionary, developmental; advances in knowledge and practices, understanding of world, sustainability

* I am using a capital R in reference to Sutton-Smith's use of the term

Power	Play as expression of power, contestive play or festivals. Instinctual. Dark. Rule-based and orderly or an indeterminate interaction of forces?	Hierarchy and power play in institutions/research. How we 'play the research game successfully; who or what gets funded, in the hegemonic thinking and practices that are celebrated and upheld in the research status quo. Challenges to this can be seen as efforts to redress power imbalances e.g. students as research partners, not assistants.
Fate	Our primitive desire to control the circumstances of life through magic and prayer; games of fate and fortune, luck, altered states of consciousness, being in the hands of the gods, dark and cruel play. Play as subversion. An inconstant, chaotic universe.	The use of games of chance, serendipitous enquiry or 'what if' thinking; Sheldrake's participation in tests to evaluate the impact of hallucinatory mushrooms on consciousness could fit this form of research
Identity	Closely related to the rhetoric of power. Communal identity through contestive play, forms of bonding and belonging.eg. parades, festivals, enactments, cultures of play providing identity and solidarity.	Exploration of community, collective identity and belonging; rituals, carnivals, festivals, such as the University of Winchester example, cited earlier. Also Kane (2004) – arguing for a radical change in the way society is organized.
Self	Finding the meaning of play in the quality of the player's experience. A state of mind, a way of seeing and being. Shares the common ground of freedom with the Imaginary.	Metacognition, reflective practice, critical self-evaluation, so what factor or research. Solitary and cerebral forms of play. The playful research analytic memo?
The Imaginary	The unreal, fanciful, imagined, visionary. Transformation is the key characteristic of this Rhetoric. Can also be about disorder and deconstruction of reality. Artists and creators, make believe, telling	Taking liberties with reality, unfettered imagination. Theatrics, rewriting of legends and stories (e.g. Trew, 2019, LEGO® Serious Play® to explore complex topics metaphorically through brick models without limitations of the feasible. *The Journal of Imaginary Research*

	stories.	*(https://journalofimaginaryresearch.home.blog/)* encourages researchers to develop creative accounts of fictional projects as a means of honing writing skills.
Frivolity	Play as nonsense and inversion, escape and diversion, useless play. The festival as frivolity. Jokers, fools, comedians, often including those who speak truth to power. A rhetoric to potentially undermine the others.	Frivolity and disorder allow for the questioning of accepted tropes and practices. Holly Gramazio's essay *The floor is made of lava (http://www.hollygramazio.net/blog/2020/4/1/the-floor-the-floor)* insists that her investigation of the lava game is not research. However, in sample size, questions and analysis it has plenty in common with it, while being funny, playful and provocative.

The table above is evidence that the Rhetorics are already visibly allied to play practices in research across the disciplines. As a means of ascertaining their relevance I included them as forms of value (along with others drawn from literature/experience) and asked respondents to score their importance in HE using a five point Likert Scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. They could also add in additional forms of value they felt were missing. The highest scoring values are shared here[xiii] and serve to support the strength of opinion concerning the value of play-based research.

Table 2. Showing top ten scores against categories of play value from survey

Purpose and value of play	*%agree/ strongly agree*	*Sample cross references to reasons why play is used in research*
For fostering creativity and innovation	98%	3
For enjoyable experiences	97%	3,4,5,6,7,8,9
For freedom and experimentation	97%	3,4,5,8
For progress and development	95%	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,10
For self-knowledge and expression	92%	2,5,6,10
For fun[xiv]	91%	3,4,5,6,7,8,9
For generating positive mood state	90%	3,4,5,6,7
For imagination and fantasy	88%	1,3,4,5,6,7,8
For dealing with power dynamics	82.4%	1,5,7,8,9

To explore frivolity and disorder	78.4%	1,3,5,8,9

These scores re-present the Rhetorics listed in Table 1 and tie in with the reasons why participants play, as indicated by the numbers from the previous list. One form of value included in the survey does not make it into the top ten: survival. This is one which Sutton-Smith advocated for strongly. In *The Ambiguity of Play* he argued that 'play's engineered predicaments model the struggle for survival' suggesting that this struggle also has a cultural aspect in our search for 'safety, approval, achievement, love and even significance' (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 229). In *Play for Life* (2017), published posthumously, he extends this focus to correlate play to the six primary emotions and to strengthen his case for play as part of the viability of human existence and of emotional survival.

Kane (2004, p. 6) supports this view, writing '…play enters into our lives in much more profound and constitutive ways than as merely the stuff of recreation or leisure, idleness or diversion.'

Survival is one form of value that has increased in visibility since the start of this project. The importance of play for survival has emerged during the pandemic, for mental and physical wellbeing in all activities and as a means of connection. As I wrote in this blogpost (https://engagingimagination.com/2020/09/10/playing-in-a-pandemic/), evidence has been all around us of how people were playing, reflected in participant commentary and in webinars/conferences on this theme. Play is not just distraction; it correlates to our deepest needs.

When play does not work

Participants identified the following barriers to play in research; dominant paradigms, fear, negative perceptions, assumptions about propriety, and poor planning and facilitation, unpacked as follows.

- The passion for measurement

In research, as in all forms of academic activity, there is pressure to have something to show for your time spent; progress reports, dissemination (interim and final), outputs, publication. The shift to a metrics-driven culture in universities, where only measurable outputs carry significant weight is partly responsible for this. This is particularly problematic for demonstrating the slow-burn benefits of certain activities, or trying to evidence intangibles.. To paraphrase a familiar saying, if you only measure what you can, you miss out on measuring what you should. Just because you cannot measure something does not make it meaningless.

- Wrong ways to play?

In exploring perceptions of play, respondents were also asked whether play was usual in their field and if any forms of play would be unacceptable. Mostly the answer was yes to the first question, and 'no' to the

second, summarised thus: 'No wrong kind of play, but wrong ways to try play'. Attenuations to answers included context, and the need for play to be ethical, support goals and enable players to transform as human beings. Any play that was hurtful, dangerous or immoral, was not condoned. All of these are already at the heart of ethical scholarship and research.

- Fear of open or unstructured play

Many respondents felt that play had to be purposeful in order to warrant inclusion in a repertoire of research approaches, however not all.

> 'I don't think you can have too much play but you've got have play with a purpose in an academic setting'

One respondent challenged the view that play for play's sake was an unaffordable luxury in HE (as opposed to purposeful play) 'which, actually when you think about it, [it] should be happening because that's where the gold might come in'. This speaks to the nervousness that the academy manifests with regard to open-ended or unstructured play, in case it looks like time-wasting. Purposeful play, with everything explained and orchestrated, appears to some as much better for value for money. And yet play for play's sake may lead to insights or ideas that our planning has not catered for.

- Poorly managed play

This includes infantilising activity, competitive play which gets out of hand, play where participants feel exposed, badly planned play or that which feels trivial, forced and divorced from aim or activity.

One respondent argued that play 'needs authenticity, purpose and creating the conditions whereby this feels right and doesn't feel like a bolt-on and participants can connect with their own reasons for play as opposed to someone else's reasons for using play'.

Play may also fall flat when those using it have not fully appreciated the theory or premise of play and who then cherry pick or dilute it without understanding why they are doing.

> 'People who don't understand why they are playing. If somebody were to stop you at any point and say why are you doing that I would always be able to say why. I think the dangers are when people think "Oh I enjoyed that I'll do that", but not to be able to understand the why behind it. That's for me when we come unstuck'

- Negative opinions and perceptions

A number of these seem to stem from bad experiences of play in the past or fixed expectations about 'right or wrong' modes of researching.

> 'The only downside is the perception of other people, not valuing what I do – that is the only disadvantage, when other people don't understand the fact that you're doing something different.'

All of the above can be equated to matters of good research management; tailoring activities to purposes and being clear about these; being scrupulous in our ethical approaches; planning and managing processes and encounters effectively; and choosing tools that are fit for purpose and people. Why then should play should be considered different from any other form of academic engagement? While play is often being described as risky (for some of the reasons listed above) tedious, ill-advised or inappropriate research activities of any kind can carry the same risks of inefficacy, indifference, or – worse - offence.

Let us reiterate here the point made earlier as to the importance of research modes for the ineffable: as an interview respondent noted:

> '…what kind of research methods can actually meaningfully captivate an experience that can almost never be captured in words alone […] it's extremely important that you sort of don't allow the currently available methods and research approaches to dictate what you can research.'

Conclusions

In the examples of play given, and the reasons why play is used in research, I hope I have made explicit the following points, namely that

1. play mirrors traditional research in the territory it investigates and the intent of its methods; to problematize, question, unsettle, amplify, resolve and then problematize all over again.
2. play is no different from other potential approaches to research; like these its use should be evaluated and considered on the basis of fit with, and enhancement of, the research goals.
3. perceptions are the prime enablers of, or barriers to, effective play-related research, not play per se.
4. copious evidence exists of the value of play to researchers and their research endeavours.
5. this value strongly relates to their own values as researchers.
6. the importance of play as human, connective and embedded within our consideration of existence is clear.
7. all Seven Rhetorics are visible within a range of research activities and contribute to our theoretical understanding of, and basis for, play as a serious contributor to these.

While it is clear that individuals and institutions are already committing to play-related research to some extent, mainstream acceptability has not yet been achieved. How long this will take will, of course, depend on where individuals and institutions are currently. I believe, however, that the following actions will enable the legitimation of play and playfulness as serious research.

Individuals and institutions need to

- grasp, discuss and apply play theory in research activity.

- encourage, reflect on and share play-based practices.

- question and reframe limiting beliefs about proper/improper research practices.

- rebuff the 'that's not how it's done' culture.

- challenge negative perceptions and behaviours.

- reassure academics that they have permission to research playfully.

- create and publicise an understanding of play that is wise, nuanced and complicated.

- allow for a spectrum of play and playful practices, including those which distinguish or cross disciplinary divides and those which conflict.

- experiment with free play practice.

- be fearless and determined, in the face of wider educational ideologies or governmental/other dominant value systems.

- make space/s for play practices, online and on campus.

- normalise the integration of play in academic life.

- participate in internal, external and global networks.

- be aware of the limitations of metrics and seek out other indicators of value.

My personal view is that the ideas above are not radical propositions. As this paper and my study more widely show, many are already being enacted. They merely need critical mass to cement their acceptance. At a time when the forms and structures of higher education are being challenged at their roots due to Covid 19 this is a positive opportunity that should not be missed.

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[i] This does not exclude the fact that researchers and play practitioners can be one and the same.

[ii] I refer to academic practice to encompass teaching, support for learning, teacher development and research, recognising that many academics are involved in all of these and that these practices interweave.

[iii] A condition of funding, due to the specific interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation.

[iv] A key difference to note here is that he elaborated them with primary concern for definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic play functions and less so with how players view their own experiences and reasons for playing (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 16-17). The focus of my study is on the latter.

[v] For full details of the research project please look at https://engagingimagination.com/the-value-of-play/

[vi] As noted in the abstract, the study is concerned with academic practice as a whole, while the focus in this paper is specifically on research.

[vii] This selectivity with regard to play preferences was also voiced by participants in the study; each of us perhaps secretly wondering if, to be a true aficionado of play we should like all of it. We agreed, however, that this is both an unnecessary and unrealistic expectation.

[viii] https://engagingimagination.com/researcher-statement-and-expectations/

[ix] Participant term.

[x] Something that also occurs in object-based learning, the use of Wunderkammer and even in improvised comedy; the British comedian Julian Clary used to terrorise audiences by investigating the contents of their handbags and using them as fodder for his jokes.

[xi] Pablo Picasso: Metamorphoses of the Human Form : Graphic Works, 1895-1972.

[xii] http://www.counterplay.org/

[xiii] There is not space in this paper to share all forms of value and fully discuss them.

[xiv] Seen as distinct from enjoyable experience.

Note 1: At the time of writing (February 2021) the full analysis of data is unfinished and therefore what is shared is selective and provisional. Please bear this in mind when reading.

Note 2: Unless otherwise stated all verbal quotes in speech marks are from participants in The Value of Play in HE