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1

Imagining the Play-Ritual Continuum

AUDUN KJUS

Sometimes, doing research is almost like playing a game. The researcher becomes absorbed by the challenge: twisting and turning elements to find the best combination, perfecting technique, and reviewing and reiterating with great patience. At its most intense, one enters a bubble, where only the task seems relevant and the world outside appears to have little consequence. Getting close to the end, tension increases, because the outcome is still uncertain. The result could be a thing of beauty, but until it is completed there is always a risk that the project may fall apart, ending with a whimper instead of a bang. At other times, doing research is more like conducting a ritual, moving through the stipulated and institutionally sanctioned procedures, aiming to create potent models for certain phenomena in the world. And the results may, if they are effective and gain favor, acquire an elevated status, as even more real than the experiences they were built upon.

Academic discussion of the relation between play and ritual has resurfaced at irregular intervals. At the 1978 conference of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, anthropologist Steven J. Fox (1980, 57) stated that play and ritual appear to be closely related and interrelated activities that should be studied in tandem. However, relatively few appear to have done this. More recently, archaeologist Colin Renfrew (2017, 14)

has pointed out that while physical evidence of both play and ritual may be found in archaeological source material, determining which is which is not an easy task. When working with this puzzle, Renfrew was frustrated by the blurred conceptual distinction, which added to the confusion (10). To clarify, he decided to compare a definition of play with two definitions of ritual (Bell 1997, 138–69; Burghardt 2005, 70–82; Rappaport 1999, 24). This helped him identify a number of similarities, but he was unable to find significant differences. He had to conclude that archaeologists should be open to the possibility that the remnants they uncover may have been used in the context of play, of ritual, or of both.

The idea for this book was born when two of us, who shared a project on children's games, began exploring the interesting but theoretically difficult middle ground between play and ritual. What started as a reading circle gained momentum through national and international conference panels, where we met other researchers who were grappling with similar problems, predominantly in studies of adult experience. The core content of the book consists of nine empirical studies, drawn from different strands of everyday life. This empirical bias is not accidental. Our perspective is that while, on the one hand, play appears to be a basic animal activity that evades definition and, on the other hand, ritual appears to be a concept that refers to a nearly endless variety of social arrangements, it is not likely that the relationship between the two can ever be caught within a finite theoretical understanding. Still, this should not stop us from developing analytical language to explore and interpret acts and settings that have affinity with both social registers. What the empirical phenomena studied in this book have in common is that they provide gateways to intersections and transitions between the playful and the ritual, showing the complex intermingling of play, playfulness, game, ritual, ceremony, rite, and ritualizing. In the final chapter, connections are made between the different cases, and some of the theoretical ideas suggested in this first chapter are revisited.

The remaining part of this chapter is aimed at improving the analytical relationship between the terms *play* and *ritual*. By mapping both the distance and the closeness between the two terms, the goal is to create a situation where they, without too much quarrel and discontent, can be put to work in tandem in front of the same proverbial carriage. The text moves through four approaches. Two existing well-shaped sets of criteria for

identifying *play* and *ritual* are discussed, to examine how the criteria for one term relate to the other term. A similar exercise is done on a selection of empirical studies of play and ritual, respectively. This leads to a discussion of how phenomena at the extreme ends of the play-ritual continuum function differently with regard to Gregory Bateson's (2000 [1972]) play-paradox: the fact that the characters, actions, and situations that are played, both are and are not the characters, actors, and situations they depict. However, since empirical studies of play and ritual are often complicated by the layered and uneven contents of the two main concepts, I begin by offering a brief introduction of the two words and their histories.

THE TWO WORDS

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Play and *ritual* are quite different words, used to describe and explain actions with many similar features. The word *play* is rooted in everyday language. According to etymologists, the original meaning was something like "a quick and lively movement." The use of phrases such as "the play of light on water" may then be considered to honor the denotation of the word, its original meaning, even if the expression today seems more like a metaphorical expansion.

Across languages, the basic words for play have generally been used to cover wide areas. They have, for instance, been used with reference to music, dance, sports, and children's games. Medieval historian Johan Huizinga (1950 [1938], 28–55) observed how the broader field of play is divided in different ways in different languages. In English, the somewhat special situation is the distinction between *play* and *game*. *Play* (from the Anglo-Saxon) refers to a special form of movement. *Game*, in contrast, originally did not refer to the appearance or physical act of playing but to the state of mind of the player. Game is a Norse word for *fun*, which makes the English expression *fun and games* a pleonasm. In German, the situation is simpler because *Spiel* is used for the entire field of play. In Norwegian (my native language), an approximate division of labor has been made between the native word *lek* and the imported word *spill* (from German). While both words originally designated a movement or an exchange, *spill* is used for sports, music, and theater and has become the dominant word for activities strictly based on rules, such as board games and card games, leaving *lek* as referring to freer forms of play.

If the aim (as with theorists such as Caillois 2001 [1961]; Fagen 1981; Huizinga 1950 [1938]; Sutton-Smith 1997) is to use the word *play* to designate a basic form of human and animal behavior, some aspects of this word quickly become apparent: it is strongly associated with children and childhood and is often used as the counterpart of earnestness or seriousness. For many, classifying something as play means defining it as *not serious*. New Zealand educator and folklorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1997, 35–47) noted that the strong link between play and childhood, as the opposite of seriousness and responsibility, does not seem to do justice to either children or play.

In vernacular use, concepts of play have a long and complex history. In comparison, the concept of *ritual* has a more specific origin and a more accountable history (Bell 1997, 3–89). The word has Latin roots and has long had its home in theology. Entries in mid-nineteenth-century dictionaries explain the word as *precepts for ceremonies during divine service*. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the word came into use as a specialist term in the history of religion, and from then on it was also used with reference to regularities in non-Christian religious ceremonies. William Robertson Smith (1846–94) held that rituals materialized people's sense of community, and he saw in them the seeds of both religion and society. His contemporary, anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), held that the study of rituals could reveal a transition between cultural stages in the history of humankind.

The first academic ritual studies were based on a retrospective premise, where the aim was to look back through the ages to the origins of humankind. This tradition included researchers who came to consider the cultural patterns they found not as first and foremost pre-historical but rather as basic and common to humankind. Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) chose to study the natives of Australia because he assumed they had one of the most primitive cultures, but he ended up drawing general conclusions about how people construct and comprehend their collective selves through acts that allow them to sense their community (Durkheim 1912). Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) used ethnographic data from presumptively primitive cultures as a point of departure but used these data to develop a general theory of how social positions are created by different forms of exclusion and inclusion through ritual processes (van Gennep 1960 [1909]). They were followed by shelves of anthropological studies about how ritual practices contribute to preserving and re-creating social institutions.

The anthology *Secular Ritual* (1977), edited by anthropologists Sally Falk Moore (1924–2021) and Barbara G. Myerhoff (1935–85) represented a development in this research tradition. Myerhoff and Moore argued that cultural researchers should study the production of meaning in non-religious ceremonies, such as birthday parties, political rallies, and the opening of new buildings, using the same analytical tools as those applied to the study of religious ceremonies. They also invited researchers not only to study alien and exotic rituals but to do research in their domestic fields, in their own contemporary industrialized societies. A significant departure from previous ritual research was their foregrounding of individual agency (5).

Myerhoff and Moore did not perceive ritual as a predominantly historical legacy but as a vessel that could be utilized for various purposes. This understanding, found in a widespread manner in cultural research today, is relatively new. It only came into use toward the end of the 1970s, and it still took time before it gained acceptance. In the Nordic countries, it had its clear breakthrough in 1995 with the Swedish anthology *Gatan är vår* [The street is ours], which the editor Barbro Klein (1995, 11) placed in the lineage of Myerhoff and Moore.

At that time, however, the word *ritual* had long been a part of everyday speech, with meanings that often differ from the present-day cultural theory concept. On the one hand, people may perceive rituals as irrational and primitive (more or less as Tylor [1873] saw them). On the other hand, people may associate rituals with empty formalism. If you label ceremonial acts as *only ritual*, you use a figure of speech that has a long pedigree. Theological controversy over the efficacy and role of ritual in religious practice was a central aspect of the Reformation, when Catholics saw the many rituals of the church as revelations of divine presence while Protestants considered the same acts at best as empty gestures and at worst as scam and deception (Muir 2005, 163–201). A somewhat similar approach, but not necessarily with a negative understanding, is to use the word *ritual* simply to denote a set of regular procedures. While folklorists and anthropologists usually reserve the concept of ritual for pronounced and explicitly performed sets of acts that produce values, identities, and meaning (Ronström 2017, 240–41), social science researchers, in a tradition linked to the symbolic interactionism and micro-sociology of Erving Goffman, are inclined to use the term to refer to all forms of habitual and repetitive

action—for example, studies of how we get ready for the day in the bathroom in the morning or of how we act in the company cafeteria (232–33).

What can be learned from this initial consideration of the two words? It is obvious that they have many and complex uses, and it cannot be expected that stable basic meanings can be established. But when the intention is to enter the field of tension, fluctuation, and cultural energy that lies between play and ritual, this may not be necessary. If the goal is to examine actions that are *both/and* or *neither/nor* and to study transitions from the one to the other, whether with clear fractures or elusive ambivalence, then the potential meanings of the basic concepts are part of what must be explored. Here, a crucial point and difficult question is whether the distinction between play and ritual marks two related but basically different forms of behavior, or if the distinction is based on the categories and pre-understandings that are used to interpret the behavior, and that *play* and *ritual* rather should be perceived as two different discursive and analytical approaches.

EVOLUTIONIST BACKDROP

Compared to the many volumes of ethnographic literature on ritual, the corresponding literature on play is limited. In early ethnographic studies, the category of play was also subordinated to the study of rituals. Subjects such as the history of religion, anthropology, and folkloristics aimed to discern the source and origin of cultural forms. Leading figures argued that the origin of art, religion, and legislation could be found in archaic and pre-historical religious rituals (Robertson Smith 1894, 55). In the quest to find the nascent onset of cultural expressions, some researchers also thought the study of play might provide good clues.

Edward Burnett Tylor used children's games as a key example when he introduced the term *survival* into his cultural theory. He was considering both developments in which children's playful imitations of adult serious rituals outlived their original cultural stage and thus could give clues about earlier social customs (Tylor 1873, 72) and situations where serious adult rituals ceased to be functional but were still continued as games (78).

As pointed out by Alice Bertha Gomme (1898, 458), who published the first large collection of traditional games from the British Isles, Tylor did not develop these perspectives further. In the analytical essay that sums

up her book, Gomme attempted to do this herself. She categorized types of games according to their formal aspects and made assumptions about the original ritual functions of the different types. For instance, she assumed that circle games had originated as ceremonies within a community, while line games originated from ceremonies between communities (480–81). She distinguished among three different types of marriage games and related them to three different steps in the evolution of marriage ceremonies. On the question of how rituals and ceremonies had developed into games, she followed both of Tylor's suggestions. Early in the essay, she describes how children's playful imitations of adult behavior had outlived the serious original practices, sometimes by centuries (459). Toward the end, she also suggests a more continuous transmission, where the original practices have gradually been altered to suit later ideas (528).

Henry Bett (1929, 8) was one of the English folklorists who followed the first suggestion of Tylor and Gomme. For Bett, the most exciting aspect was the possible relationship between children's games and blood-thirsty heathen rituals. When children were burning figures made out to be witches or traitors during bonfire parties in spring or autumn, he assumed that they had initially copied the human sacrifices of the druids (as described by Roman authors). He interpreted singing games like "London Bridge Is Falling Down" as remnants of a custom in which the corpse of a sacrificed person was placed in the foundations of bridges, city walls, and other important constructions (114; e.g., Zumwalt 1999, 26–27).

Scottish folklorist Lewis Spence (1947, 1) followed the second suggestion of Tylor and Gomme. For instance, he reasoned that the ballgames included in calendar festivals had originally been employed to help the gods in their cosmological work (90). The movements of the ball between participating players had originally represented the movements of the sun or moon across the firmament (19). On a deeper level, he interpreted the ballgame as sympathetic magic: the gods could be lazy and exhausted and needed to be awakened and spurred into action. The human energy exerted on the playing field was meant to inspire the gods to make spring flourish and autumn ripen (190).

Spence also discussed the Robin Hood festivals held in English villages. They were celebrated in the spring, and he identified remnants of fertility rituals in them. Robin Hood was a master bowman, and the shooting of arrows was meant to make rain fall. Marian, who had to be liberated

and whom Robin won with his supreme archery skills, Spence identified as the goddess of spring. The way Robin Hood died in ballads and stories, by bleeding to death, Spence (1947, 36) thought was reminiscent of an ancient blood offering.

HOMO LUDENS

Historian Johan Huizinga's book (1950 [1938]) on the history of playing, initially published in Dutch in 1938, was also situated in an evolutionist paradigm—as was most of the cultural research before World War II. The theory of cultural development was an important element in the political ideology of European imperialism. This line of thinking gave those who were at the forefront of development the right and obligation to firmly lead more backward cultures toward higher developmental stages. Like so many others, Huizinga was searching for the origin and source of culture, and he found *play* a good candidate.

Compared to the British folklorists, Huizinga did an about-face on the connection between play and ritual. He rejected the view that ritual was more fundamental, with play a reflection or degeneration. He put play first and assumed that other cultural forms had developed from play. An ambivalence in Huizinga's view on the relation between play and ritual, however, needs to be pointed out.

On the one hand, he claims that in the cultures of those labeled *primitive people*, *ritual* and *play* cannot be easily separated. He states that people in primitive societies perform their rituals “in a spirit of pure play, truly understood” (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 5). He even adds that ritual shares all formal characteristics with play (18) and warns that if we consider rituals to be serious and play as not serious, we will probably misunderstand the customs of archaic and primitive peoples (20).

On the other hand, some of his formulations show that he considers play to be the more fundamental form. From play come myths and rituals. From myths and rituals come law and order, trade and profit, arts and crafts, fiction, wisdom, and science (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 5). To Huizinga, who was leaning on an evolutionary approach, it was important that play was not only a basic form of expression but that it also historically preceded other forms. The belief that so-called primitive people did not need to distinguish between play and ritual and that such a distinction became

more important in higher cultures resonates with ideas about development through cultural differentiation.

The thematic chapters of Huizinga's book can be criticized for constructing cultural history in a weak and random way. The assumption toward which we are heading, which presumably will connect the dots, is the conjecture that cultural creations such as fiction, philosophy, legislation, and warfare have developed from play. If this theory is rejected or discarded as uninteresting, one is left with arguments of little substance. The book's introductory essay easily escapes such criticism. Here, Huizinga delivers sharp and unexpected insights like pearls on a string, and there are good reasons why cultural researchers keep returning to this text.

Huizinga opens by pointing out that play must be a fundamental activity, as many species of animals play in similar manners. When watching dogs play, we quickly understand that they have rules, they pretend, and they delight in it. Huizinga makes the point that play *in itself* is meaningful for the animals engaged in it, using this observation to position himself theoretically and methodologically. He maintains that many of the earlier studies of play have focused on determining how play satisfies other needs—such as relaxation, learning, socialization, or shedding superfluous energy. In contrast, Huizinga wants to study the inherent properties of play. Something as fundamental as play deserves to be studied on its own merit, not merely to determine how it is useful for other activities and purposes. Huizinga encourages researchers to ask questions such as: what does play mean for those who play? What makes play fun, exciting, or absorbing?

For Huizinga, a decisive point is that play must be something the mind does. Play is not only a consequence of the natural external conditions under which one lives. With play, the mind actively intervenes and creates a temporary order. When entering play, certain limits are established that create a zone beyond ordinary life. In this zone, some of the conditions of existence are explored—one imagines some of life's conditions (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 4). Huizinga perceives a close connection between play and the mind's capacity to imagine. He claims that both language and mythology, when they are created, must be considered to be forms of play: language because any abstract concept is built on the most daring metaphorical leaps of the mind; mythology because it is boiling and bubbling with the urge to create and the joy of creating, in a mode of simultaneous lightheartedness and seriousness (4–5).

After this initial flight of theory, Huizinga (1950 [1938], 7–13) presents a series of overarching characteristics of play, in the paragraphs most often cited by other authors. Even if Huizinga is careful to point out that the list of characteristics should not be understood as an attempt at defining play—in his opinion, play is a phenomenon that escapes definition—the list is often referred to as “Huizinga’s definition of play.”

ANALYTICAL Pincer Maneuver No. 1

While it could be useful for Huizinga to (in some contexts) see play and ritual as identical phenomena, the goal here is to manage the concepts *play* and *ritual* as two equally valuable analytical approaches that may be used in interactive ways. As the first move in this direction, I will repeat the exercise carried out by archaeologist Colin Renfrew, but with other examples. I will examine two good lists of formal characteristics of play and ritual respectively (Huizinga 1950 [1938]; Ronström 2017), and highlight criteria in which the two social formats may appear to be different.

Characteristics of Play Related to Rituals

In Huizinga’s list of formal characteristics of play, there are, as he also remarked, many items that can be directly applied to rituals, but there are also things that may appear to be different in the two settings. When Huizinga summarizes the characteristics, he writes that play is a voluntary activity that is actively and deliberately established beyond ordinary life and in which participants become absorbed through the alternating buildup and release of tension (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 13). I will discuss these three points in more detail.

PLAY IS A VOLUNTARY ACTIVITY. With one of his apt formulations, Huizinga states that if you are forced to do something, it is no longer play. He continues that only when it has been formalized as a social function can play be understood as duty or responsibility. Initially, play is a surplus phenomenon in the sense that it can be stopped or postponed, and it is only necessary to the degree that people may claim they have a need to amuse themselves (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 7–8).

Brian Sutton-Smith (1997, 35) criticized this point by Huizinga as too contingent on Western modernist rhetoric, where play is associated with

childhood and leisure as the counterpart of seriousness, work, and adult life. This is a historically conditioned understanding that does not take play as a universal phenomenon into consideration. The criterion that the play activity must be voluntary demands discussion. When it comes to rituals, the criterion is inherently unreasonable. While participation in rituals may indeed be voluntary and many rituals have spectacular elements that invite voluntary participation, the opposite is just as characteristic. Rituals organize time, space, and social environments in ways that are obligatory, compulsory, and even coercive. On Christmas Eve you may lock your door and draw all your curtains, but you will still know that it is Christmas everywhere around you. If a person's status is to be changed from free citizen to convicted felon, a legal process is required. Before a candidate can be awarded a PhD, they must give a disputation. Until the 1920s, Lutheran confirmation was obligatory in Norway. For instance, the ethnologist Eilert Sundt started his career in a position at a correction facility, where his job was to forcefully confirm young people from society's lower ranks.

The binding and mandatory aspects of many rituals have gradually become less obvious in modern individualist societies. A reason for this is that the pronouncement and administration of social duties and rights have increasingly become the responsibility of strong bureaucratic systems. Baptism is no longer the act that secures a newborn baby's identity. This is guaranteed when the child is entered in the population register. In many countries a marriage must be registered by City Hall to be valid, and people may correspondingly see the public ceremony and reception as optional. However, most people who marry choose to have some public ceremony, and a naming ceremony is often arranged when parents decide not to baptize their child. You can also ask parents if arranging their children's birthday parties is optional.

All things considered, it seems strange and unreasonable that Huizinga could maintain that play and ritual share all formal characteristics, given that he opens by pointing out that play is voluntary and later attaches great importance to this point.

PLAY HAS BOUNDARIES. Play is distinguished from mundane life by marking a zone for play in time and space. Children distinguish between what is done in play and what is merely done. Often, play takes place in a venue for play that is established in advance, physically and/or

ideologically, with or without deliberation. Just as play is outside ordinary life, it is not expected that it should satisfy ordinary demands or expectations. Play is an interlude that follows its own intrinsic order. This is also what gives play a recognizable form as a cultural phenomenon. When the interaction has been carried out, it can be repeated, copied, and varied. It can be included in society's cultural storeroom, preserved and passed on as tradition. Play requires a certain order. If you ignore the rules, the game is ruined—you kill the essence of the game and render it worthless (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 8–10).

The fact that both play and ritual activities are marked and framed with delineated internal spaces, which are experienced in contrast to ordinary life on the outside, is an important point in the theoretical literature of both fields. Several authors have discussed how time and space must be oriented and a controlled inner zone must be created for rituals to be effective (Gustafsson 2002, 24; Handelsman 1980, 67; Ronström 2017, 238). The extent to which what happens inside the zone affects what happens on the outside begs discussion. When Huizinga first writes about this (1959 [1938], 9), he describes the inner zone of play as completely separated from the regular world and states that what happens in the play event is without consequences for ordinary life. Intuitively, this seems simplistic. Later, Huizinga also elaborates how the sense of belonging created in play activities tends to last beyond the play events. This is not to say that all play activities lead to the formation of an association or a club, but the perception of having something in common, outside of ordinary and mundane settings, may retain its sheen of magic when the interaction is over and everyone has gone home (12).

This line of thinking could be taken further, as play preferences and play experiences are often bound up with the development of personal identity. Play preferences and play styles will have bearing on who people think they are, whether they are dancers, golfers, fly fishers, or gamers. The fact that one shares experiences with, and displays oneself to, other people is an important aspect of this creation of identity. At the same time, skills articulated during play, such as strength, stamina, wisdom, and cunning—or alternatively weakness, foolishness, clumsiness, and stupidity—may be retained and continued in non-play contexts. If this is seen as a form of general seeping of significance from play to social life beyond the boundaries of play, it could indicate a sliding continuity between play and ritual.

While the properties you are assigned in ritual tend toward formal social roles, those you acquire in play may be informal but no less real. What you perform on the football field you also bring into the classroom.

Perhaps one can say that the context of ritual contains expectations that the connection between what you do in the inner framed zone and what will happen in the outside ordinary world should be more than random. In the case of ritual, some form of systematic feedback is expected. If so, it would be fitting to describe ritual as play turned inside out, with the capacity to bind and orient not only its own inner zone but also with respect to the surroundings—not only while the play lasts but afterward as well.

PLAY IS EXCITING. The excitement is founded on uncertainty. No one knows how the interaction will end. In some play activities, a result is achieved when the interaction is over, and the player must demonstrate skill to reach a good result. Other play events have no such clear conclusions, and some researchers have called for a significant differentiation to be made between types of play in this respect (Caillois 2001, 9). Still, even in forms like imaginative role-play, excitement is built from uncertainty. What is to be created this time? Where does the play activity lead us? According to Huizinga (1950, 10–11), it is how play takes place within established frames that allows it to be fully immersive. The reduced horizon produces a clarity that enables the play event to bind or enchant. In a chaotic and confusing world, the play activity can create temporary perfection, and you can (preferably on a temporary basis) lose yourself in play.

Rituals can also be exciting. Consider, for example, the religious examination of Lutheran confirmands, when everyone is listening attentively and cannot fail to notice whether you answer correctly. For some, the way certain rituals put an individual in focus and invite the attention of an entire congregation is nerve-racking and unbearable, while others find it exhilarating and thrive on it. Excitement or tension can relate to whether the ritual actions are carried out correctly. The vicar should not stumble while carrying the chalice. The best man or maid of honor should not leave the wedding rings at home. However, excitement is a more basic principle for play than for rituals. Those who have lost interest in a play activity have in principle already abandoned it. Obviously, even if you find it boring, you can still shoot marbles with grandchildren

or small siblings, but in such a case it may be more precise to just call this “play” an activity. If you are not good at hiding your lack of interest in the game, you may end up ruining it for your playmate, who is engaging with earnest playfulness.

There is a striking inverted mirror pattern in that while play needs a necessary degree of protected security before it can take place, rituals are often used in uncertain or tension-filled situations—during sickness and crises, when the harvest needs to be reaped, or when the team is about to enter the field. The classical references for the connection between rituals and uncertainty are Bronislaw Malinowski's (1948, 59; 1984 [1922], 413) studies of customs in the Trobriand Islands in Melanesia. He observed that rituals tended to align around insecure situations. Very few rituals were connected to safe coastal fishing, while the uncertain fishing on the open sea swarmed with rituals.

Educator Birgitta Olofsson has observed the link between personal security and the ability to play among children. She relates the need for security to two other characteristics of children's play: reciprocity and the establishment of play zones. A characteristic of children's play is that the participants take turns being the active party, the one who acts and talks. Imagine a situation where two children are throwing a ball, and one suddenly decides to sit on the ball and refuses to yield it. The other will probably quickly abandon the play situation. If children are to enter an open interaction, they must feel confident that the playmates have honest purposes, that they are genuinely interested in playing and not inclined to exploit or harass the other player (Olofsson 1993, 26–28, 30–40, 134–40). Anyone who wants to observe these mechanisms could also visit the nearest kennel. If a dog is invited to play but does not feel safe because the other dog appears to be intimidating or violent, the invited dog will give signals that urge the potential playmate to calm down. If the loud dog complies, then the play activities can start.

Olofsson also holds that children are more ready to enter into play if they manage to establish play zones that are not easily invaded by foreign powers. Some adults have no scruples about breaking into a children's playground, thereby disturbing the running game. In avoidance of this, children may prefer to play in places that are off adults' beaten track, where the frames of the play are relatively secure and they avoid having the excitement they have worked to build suddenly ruined by intruders.

Characteristics of Rituals Related to Play

Now I will turn the tables and approach the intersection between play and ritual from the other direction. Swedish ethnologist Owe Ronström (2017) has written about the history of the ritual concept, providing a good list of characteristics and properties of rituals. I find that all the characteristics he pointed out may also apply to play, but some of them will work somewhat differently. I will discuss only the three that differ most.

RITUALS ARE BUILT ON REPETITIONS. Many rituals belong to and are repeated at particular points in time, at specific times of the year, the week, or the day. Repetitions also contribute to building structure and expectation *within* the ritual event. A similar sequence can be used to open and close a session, or the content may consist of a number of similar motif sequences. The repetitions of sequential motifs are crucial for participants' recognition of the ritual as a cultural item and for their ability to get involved (Ronström 2017, 238).

Both forms of repetitions have parallels in play. Behavioral biologists have found that animal play also occurs at regular points of time in the day and the year (Fagen 1995, 32–33). Repetition of motif sequences of actions is one of the clearest criteria for recognizing play among animals. The play event is often initiated with meta-communicative signals that are invitations to play. Thereafter, the play frame is maintained with repetitions of related actions, and it may be adjusted with further meta-communication (Fagen 1981, 48–50). Robert Fagen wonders if humans could be the only species who have games with clearly defined endings (122). Among animals, the play events normally end by being abandoned. They may also end if some of the participants break the rules of the game (337).

In some rituals, the management of conclusions will be extra important when it has a bearing that events are carried through in such a way that the end is publicly recognized. The ritual can be a means of finalizing a social exchange with a clear result.

IN RITUALS, PARTICIPANTS TAKE ON ROLES that are distributed according to given patterns. When assuming a role, it may be marked by particular gestures, a change of clothes, the wearing of a mask, or more subtly by tone of voice or physical bearing. Taking on roles creates opportunities for many kinds of play (movements back and forth), for instance, between the role and the identity of the person playing it or between the

current and earlier holders of the role—and the participants can understand the various roles differently, even as they join and comply with the same formal rules for the interaction (Ronström 2017, 239). Thus, the role-play allows for a working polysemy, where different interpretations do not necessarily interfere with the ritual interaction.

Role-play is correspondingly normal in play, and it can also be highly formalized. It may be difficult to distinguish between play and ritual merely by observing the role-play, but one may envision a difference as to how the roles are understood. One could reason that in the play activity, there will be limited expectations that the role will have importance and impact beyond the framework of the play event, while roles in a ritual may be identities that are expected to have more general and lasting validity. Thus, situations can be envisioned where two persons participate in the same role-play, but while one of them may consider it a noncommittal pastime, the other may consider it an eternal pact.

RITUALS HAVE THE ABILITY TO PRODUCE WHAT THEY DISPLAY. Here, Ronström (2017, 241–48) reviews two comprehensive examples showing respectively how rituals may express ethnic belonging and royalty. Similarly, American folklorist Jack Santino (2009, 9) has characterized symbolic public acts performed with an intention to transform society as *ritualesque*. In one of the cases Santino describes, a group of women had decided to perform a *padding* of the house of a prominent and outspoken anti-feminist university professor. Having purchased a large quantity of women's sanitary pads, they drank wine for courage and wrote messages on the napkins in red ink. Late at night, they attached the politically soiled napkins to the professor's house, in clear view for the morning rush on the adjacent major traffic route (20). Santino's example of *ritualesque* behaviour highlights how innovative play elements can be used to invoke political interpretations of current events. While the group of women in this example were protesting against the abuse of hegemonic power, the cases explored by Ronström, with protagonists communicating royalty and ethnicity, show that defending a perceived status quo—even to the extent that the social order is portrayed as natural or eternal—can just as legitimately be labeled political.

It would be safe to say that play activities also produce what they display. The reality displayed within a play activity is something that is created and exists within the framework of the play event. An objection

could be that much play involves copying things that already exist in the serious world. Children play, for example, with models of animals and cars. They can play police officer, doctor, or football star. However, as psychologist Greta G. Fein (1987, 299) has elaborated, when children, in dramatic play sequences, copy phenomena and incidents in the world, the copies they produce are only marginally direct portraits of those things in the world and are more directly voicings and variations of the child's own thoughts and feelings about those things. Typically, the play copy is a greatly reduced version of the original. With a couple of quick lines, a small change of the voice, and perhaps an old hat, the child becomes another. While the copy is often stylized, the content of emotions and meaning is produced in full scale.

Both in play and in rituals, people are engaged in portraying and imagining some particular and selected aspects of life, and again it may be difficult to distinguish between the two forms of activity. Perhaps a distinction can be made if we also have access to the perceptions of the participants in the activity. If they perceive that what they produce is unreal, then it could be play that we have witnessed; if they perceive it as super-real, however, then it could be a ritual. At any rate, a divide can be seen when rituals are used to produce duties and rights that are intended to have stable and lasting existence.

ANALYTICAL PINCER MANEUVER NO. 2

These preliminary exercises are meant as an introduction to and preparation for a series of empirical studies, and now I turn to this more practical line of academic work. When conducting empirical research, the area between play and ritual can be approached from the vantage points of both the study of play and the study of ritual. To attempt to do both at the same time in a reasonably balanced manner is an analytical challenge. I have found few texts in the research literature that support such a maneuver, but I would like to mention some studies that merit attention.

IN STUDIES EXAMINING PLAY BEHAVIOR, biologists have observed how animals can transcend the limits of play and turn the activity into something different. In Robert Fagen's (1981, 394) review of this topic, he first describes how animals establish play as safe and fair. With dogs, apes, and other mammals, it has been observed that older or obviously

stronger individuals hold back and restrict themselves when they play with younger or weaker individuals. They allow themselves to be pursued and pretend to be caught. If someone is injured, physically or mentally, the play session is over.

It has also been observed that individuals may exploit the play setting to serve goals that go beyond the playful interaction. According to Fagen (1981), this primarily occurs among young carnivores when they start eating meat and when apes reach the age of sexual maturity. Fagen identifies strategies that violate the rules of the play activity, and he calls them *cheating* (394). The most common form of cheating is when individuals start insisting on always winning. When someone begins to do this, the play breaks down or shifts into aggression. An individual who does not accept any form of temporarily reduced status—who keeps opponents down using all means, nurtures quarrels, and exaggerates provocations—has stopped playing. It is perhaps less common to say that animals have rituals (this may depend on which ritual concept you apply), but a kind of behavior that serves the purpose of showing off and upholding a social status that has been won could be labeled ritual.

Folklorist Sally Sugarman (2005) has summarized some of the ritual aspects of children's play. She addresses how children might exploit the ambivalence of play. An aggressive attack may be perceived as both an insult and not an insult (129). The victim of the attack will often choose to define it as not an insult because being the target of violence is an experience fraught with shame. When it is obvious to outside observers that the victim has been injured and their social status reduced, it could be appropriate to consider such attacks as ritual rather than play. Sugarman also points to scenarios where children use play to establish social structures, as when the interaction purposefully excludes adults from the children's sphere or when children use play to demonstrate some form of courage, understood as a requirement for belonging in a group or in the elite among one's peers.

The common denominator in the readings of Fagen and Sugarman is that when play is used to build relatively stable, socially recognized identities, it may be on its way to the ritual register.

IN STUDIES EXAMINING RITUAL BEHAVIOR, play activities appear as elements in many of the ceremonial complexes. For instance, in celebrating Norway's Constitution Day, children first participate in a long, physically demanding parade. Afterward, they get soda pop and ice cream, and games

and play are arranged for them. Anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal has studied some of the larger ritual complexes of the Yoruba, an ethnic group in West Africa. She found that play was important in all the rituals she studied, and she identified play elements such as spectacular presentations, sudden transformations of familiar symbols, and ceremonial mock duels in which daring initiative and extravagant insults were flung back and forth. Further, she found play to be a key ingredient in Yoruba ritual theory. Yoruba rituals generally involve repeating and copying events from the lives of the gods and heroes. To re-create and call into earthly existence this eternal and divine history, sensational acts that evoke emotions and raise the heartbeat are required (Drewal 1992, 73). This aspect of Yoruba culture can be generalized and seen as a valuable contribution to cultural theory, as rituals played out in open public spaces often employ play elements to engage those who attend and hold their attention.

The introduction of play elements may influence the execution of rituals in various ways. Through play, participants are drawn into proceedings that might otherwise be excessively demanding or exhausting. Elements of play may be used to create a public focus, thus ensuring the social impact of the proceedings. When rituals end in play, the play activities offer relief from the dense and intense atmosphere created through the ceremonies. As post-liminal and incorporating rites (van Gennep 1960 [1909], 11), play activities can help the participants let go of the ritual and gradually return to normal interaction.

When discussing Victor Turner's theory on the socially renewing effects of ritual liminality and *communitas*, Drewal argues that play may have an even more fundamental importance for ritual practices. Turner has given detailed descriptions of the liminal phase of transition rituals, where the novices are separated from earlier social contexts and undergo rites that symbolically erase their earlier identities and rites that are characterized by what Turner (1982, 26–27) calls *anti-structure*—ambivalence and paradox. In the liminal phase, the actors play with common expressions and meanings and make them alien so they can be understood in new, more fundamental ways. They reshuffle familiar symbolic elements, creating grotesque and unnatural combinations. This allows new expressions and insight to arise from unforeseen combinations. In opposition to Turner, Drewal (1992) finds that in the rituals she observed, play elements were not limited to the liminal stages. To the contrary, they could erupt at any

stage of the ritual process (8). She argues that this cultivation of playfulness and play skills maintains the flexibility of the rituals and allows the performers to adapt their traditional cultural forms to changing circumstances. Maintaining a playful attitude prepares participants for transforming both the acts played out and their own interpretations of them.

More recently, Jens Kreinath (2020, 237–39) has studied rituals of venerating the Muslim saint Hz. Hızir in southern Turkey, and he has described how playful practices and cultural conceptions of play are important aspects of local cosmologies, for displaying and exploring basic ideas about human existence. He also follows Drewal in suggesting that play elements are used for adapting rituals to the situations at hand and to allow for spontaneous and unpredicted results (232).

Don Handelman (1977, 1980), building on Gregory Bateson's theory about framed forms of communication, has offered a more formal explanation as to why calendar and life-cycle celebrations often show combinations of play and ritual. According to Bateson (2000 [1972]), considerable effort is required to manage a break from ordinary socialization to a more particular and framed form of communication, such as play or ritual. Handelman reasons that it will be less demanding to move from one framed setting to another than to manage the initial break with the normal situation. When a play setting has been established, it will be easier to move on to a ritual setting, or if one is engaged in a ritual, one could easily add a game or two. This explains what can be called *the festival effect*, where over time a celebration that is well-known and well-liked ends up as a conglomerate of presentations, competitions, and role-play. In addition to the fact that it will be easier to attach new frames to old ones, the already existing collective attention that is generated in the established play or ritual zone will be an attractive social resource to tap into. What occurs in such a zone will already have social significance, and, to variable extents, it will be feasible to intervene with additional play or ritual frames and with new layers of symbolic messages.

THE WORD CAT HAS NO FUR AND CANNOT SCRATCH

Now that the theories of Gregory Bateson have been mentioned, the proverbial cat is out of the bag and it is time to present an important trait in play-ritual studies, derived from Bateson's ideas about meta-communication

and framed utterances. Two of the researchers inspired by Bateson are Brian Sutton-Smith, when he attempts to conceptualize what play is, and Don Handelman, when he tries to distinguish between play and ritual as social forms. Many will associate the idea of framed communication with the interaction studies of Erving Goffman, but it is Bateson's articulation of frame theory, from his essay on play and fantasy (2000 [1972]), that underpins Handelman's and Sutton-Smith's discussions.

The topic of Bateson's text is the human ability to communicate about communication. We can transmit meta-linguistic signals, which primarily address language and not the phenomena to which the language refers. As Bateson (2000 [1972], 178, original emphasis) puts it, "*The word cat has no fur and cannot scratch.*" We can also send meta-communicative signals that refer to and may attempt to regulate the relationship between the communicators. For Bateson, play is good place to study meta-communicative practices. For play to occur, Bateson holds that three types of signals must be understood: (1) signs that show individuals' state and purpose, (2) signs that simulate signs of the first type, and (3) signs that enable one to discriminate between signs that are meant seriously and those that are simulated (189).

The message *this is play* expresses the fact that the consequences of the actions that follow will not be identical to the consequences of the actions that are being simulated. The dog acting within the play frame, pretending to bite, knows that the pretend bite will not have the same consequences as a real bite (Bateson 2000 [1972], 180). The fact that the characters and actions within the play frame both are and are not the characters and actions they depict opens a landslide of paradoxes. The play bite is a piece of fiction, and in a certain sense it does not really exist. But it still has real consequences (182).

According to Bateson (2000 [1972], 178), the majority of meta-linguistic and meta-communicative messages are conveyed implicitly, and he assumes that the basic ability for meta-communicative behavior must be established before words and concepts for meta-communication are clarified (180). The ability to engage in play, then, appears to be a basis for developing higher semiotic skills—that is, abilities for coding and decoding different and variable relationships between map and territory. According to Bateson, in the initial use and understanding of symbols, the map is identified with the territory. Only later, map and territory are considered to exist separately. In play, there is both identification and differentiation (185).

In his book *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), Brian Sutton-Smith discusses how both scientific and vernacular theories about play have been spun around cultural rhetoric on topics such as destiny, power, identity, imagination, and development. Toward the end of the volume, Sutton-Smith outlines a thesis on what we do when we play (225–31). His theory starts with the fact that we fantasize and form ideas while we are present and acting in the world. While we are doing what we do to survive, we connect emotions to impressions, form concepts, and objectify our surroundings. When we enter into play, some of these experiences, feelings, and concepts are detached; they relocate in a different frame—a play frame—where they can be re-experienced, reconsidered, and developed. To illustrate this point, Sutton-Smith (20–21) cites an example from Jean Piaget, about how an infant at the mother's breast first suckles itself full, then starts playing with the breast.

The person who enters into play takes a leap into a virtual world. The playful state is then maintained through various measures until the play event is over. Sutton-Smith (1997, 150) mentions (as does Fagen above) repetitions, rules, and meta-communication as such measures and suggests that the forms of play can be ordered in a continuum with those that are (almost) fully regulated with formal rules on one end of the scale and those that are (almost) fully regulated with play signals and meta-communication on the other. He suggests that play activities generally produce stylized representations of existential matters and calls attention to how play often simulates or parodies danger and uncertainty (231). A variety of existential uncertainties are easily recognizable from play settings—for instance, the experiences of winning or losing, of receiving love, of being in a conflict, and of achieving a recognized social status (becoming someone). This again shows the connection between play and ritual activities, as rituals also deal with existential topics: life and death, the passing of the years, becoming an adult, being or becoming a healthy person. Who, where, and when are we? What caused this mess?

Sutton-Smith (1997, 195) warns that we go off track if we simply draw a line between real life and unreal play. He finds that the distinction should instead be between (1) experience and imagination on an ordinary/unmarked level and (2) experience and imagination on a virtual/marked level. Within the boundaries of play, characters, acts,

and emotions are played out, which are familiar from ordinary reality but are not identified with it. The play event is moving on a meta-level more than on a mimetic level, as re-voicing and interpreting the world is more crucial than copying it.

Bearing this in mind, one could attempt to use Bateson's paradox as a pair of scales to balance between play and ritual: in both forms, virtual realities are presented when something or someone both is and is not what they portray. If the scale end with *is* weighs more, then we are leaning toward the ritual register, where the virtual state is a kind of *super-reality*. If, on the other hand, the scale end with *is not* is heavier, we are leaning toward the state of play, where the virtual world is a kind of *unreality*.

This type of sliding transition is different from what Don Handelman (1977, 187; 1980) imagined when he wrote his two articles about play and ritual as complementary but mutually exclusive social forms. Handelman also starts out from Bateson's observation that the play frame is established through meta-communication. However, he suggests that the signals which establish zones for play and for ritual offer different meta-communicative messages. On entering play, it is signaled: *this is play*. On entering ritual, the message is: *let us believe . . .* (Handelman 1980, 66). While the ritual is about what should have been, play is about what could have been (Handelman 1977, 186). Those who participate in a ritual expect it to have some sort of validity and power in the mundane world beyond the frames of the proceedings (188). The ritual thus opens an explicit and acknowledged bridge of experience between the framed and the ordinary reality.

From this first distinction, Handelman derives additional distinctions, which contribute to imbuing play and ritual with separate and complementary functions: the play frame is relatively weaker, while the ritual frame is relatively stronger. The transition to play is simpler, while the transition to ritual is more complex (Handelman 1980, 67). Play is replete with opportunities for unpredictable creativity; therefore, the assumed significance of the messages produced in the play zone must be weak. Play is defined as unserious, untrue, and unreal because it is a source of disorder that the social order needs to be protected against. Play provides a malleable environment for constructing new ideas. Ritual underlines the integrity of the moral community. In play, it is possible to immediately

comment on what goes on in the social world, while a ritual is geared to commenting on truths about time and space and human affairs more slowly and in an overarching manner (Handelman 1977, 189).

POLARITY AND CONTINUITY

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If the relationship between play and ritual is considered from the participant, or emic, perspective, I believe Handelman makes sound generalizations. In many cultural settings a polarized separation exists, in which the two forms are considered radically divorced and opposite; in consequence, both the concepts and the activities are assigned to different tasks in different contexts. I am not as certain, however, that Handelman was right in claiming that as forms of behavior, they are mutually exclusive. Perhaps what Handelman posited as opposites can still be encountered in an unbroken continuum in our lived experiences.

Interestingly, anthropologist Matan Shapiro (2020, 212) has argued that the relation between play and ritual should *not* be viewed as a continuum, with two distinct ends, but rather as a spectrum with subtle immersions of shades and tones. I do not find this difference in preferred metaphor alarming. I also do not imagine the play-ritual continuum to be a linear stretch between two tidy extremes, like the continuum between darkness and light. To find relations that are more similar to the play-ritual continuum, one should look to other basic animal activities. Take, for instance, the continuum between work and rest. On the surface level, it may appear tidy. One could imagine it like a graded scale between no activity and maximum activity. But often it is not that simple. For instance, you may rest while you work and work while you rest. Both rest and work come in great varieties, some of which are culturally framed and institutionalized, even to the extent that they have a history.

Arguably, the polarity between work and rest is stronger than that between play and ritual. As this chapter has elaborated, play and ritual are activities with so many shared traits that one can easily wonder if they are different words for the same basic phenomenon. But the two terms polarize and create a distinction. Somewhat paradoxically, this also happens when Shapiro discusses the dynamic organization of the religious festival he has studied. He uses the conceptual binarity between the terms *play* and *ritual* to describe and explain the different stages of the event. The

idea of a play-ritual continuum may be useful to foreground the interrelatedness of the activities described by the two words, as long as one keeps in mind that the relation is often messy.

SIMILAR FIELDS OF RESEARCH

I would like to mention two fields of research with close relations to the ambitions of this book: namely, festival studies and studies of children's folklore. Researchers of children's folklore have noted that the cultural performances they observe contain elements that may be characterized both as social rituals (amplifying and confirming) and as playful interventions (testing and doubting) (Mechling 1999, 276). Creating groups with shared standards, traditions, and identities appears to be a central aspect of many events and performances, but the groups thus created are not just any groups, as they are sifted through the rules of specific games, played out in specific social and historical settings (Sutton-Smith 1999, 8). Sutton-Smith calls for persistent empirical studies of events that are often thought to be trivial and deemed to have little importance, predicting these as places where one may observe culture in the making (16–17).

Oddly, none of the case studies in this volume are about children's games (a fact that opens the possibility for a sequel). Play research in pedagogy and psychology mostly deals with children's games and imaginative role-play, but to reason about play more generally, many different versions of the phenomenon should be included in the empirical scope. With the current selection, we wanted to study a range of activities and events; thus, the book describes political demonstrations, lutefisk dinners, football matches, extreme sports races, computer game festivals, fandom ceremonies, marriage proposals, hen parties, and private ash scatterings.

Seeing this colorful bouquet of cases brings an easy transmission to the next related field of research: festival studies. Similar to the study of children's folklore, this is a field where ritual and play activities have been examined in detail in their social contexts. The public displays addressed are as varied and multifaceted as the case studies in this book. In his introduction to the rich anthology *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnivalesque and Ritualesque*, Jack Santino (2017, x) states that his aim in the coordinated study of very different kinds of events is not to reduce them to a single, simplistic paradigm but rather to sketch out similarities and

differences among them and show how their generic components may be used for different situations and goals. He also explains that the concepts of carnival, as an event without real consequences, and ritual, as an event with permanent and universal consequences, are idealized constructions: “Most events will have elements of the ritualesque along with the carnivalesque, and the latter does not negate the former. The two are not antithetical, and the genre frames are multivocal” (5).

I would also like to recognize how our ambition to study expressive events in which different kinds of framed interaction mix and merge into new conglomerate and creole forms is indebted to the tradition of dynamic genre analysis. This line of research gained momentum when the works of Mikhail Bakhtin were translated to English in the late 1970s. American folklorist John D. Dorst (1983, 413) was one of the forerunners, expressing a wish to embrace the way “generic instabilities and ambiguities constitute a legitimate, though largely neglected, area of research.” In the play-ritual continuum, we can expect to find genre dialogues similar to those described by Bakhtin (1986 [1929/1979], 60–61, 66), including how genres are subject to mutual influence and how style and content from simple genres are incorporated in larger, more elaborate genre formats. The capacity of play-ritual events to orient and define time, space, and social environment can be seen as parallel to what Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs (1990, 68) have described as the speaker’s active contextualization in staging the tradition of the text. Such a perception of expressive genres as historical and dynamic leads to the understanding that they are contested and that their production of social meaning is up for grabs.

THEORY AND EMPIRICISM

The capacity of rituals to organize time and space, generate groups of outsiders and insiders, and create, re-create, and anchor existentially important concepts makes them promising places of origin for rational thought and action. Because of this, ritual studies is a cherished branch of cultural research, where play is often relegated to the role of a contrast or a supplement. The question of exactly how rituals are perceived to alter reality was one of the areas of contention between Catholic and Protestant theologians during the Reformation (Muir 2005, 163–201). Catholic theologians argued that God was physically present during the rituals

and transformed the earthly substances, while Protestants asserted that the rituals contributed more indirectly, by revealing spiritual truths and strengthening believers in their belief. Then again, how did the different lay participants consider the rituals to be effective? To understand people's actions, it is a great help to have access to the concepts and theories that they themselves relate to their actions. It often makes sense to simply ask people what they intend in doing what they do. But knowledge obtained through interviews also has limitations. As often as not, we cannot fully explain what we are doing, and we may easily resort to standard explanations that we hope are acceptable to the person asking. The acts in question may be played out and have their meaning in one context while the interview about them takes place in another. Interviews must therefore be combined with the researcher's own examinations and interpretations of the words and deeds that are performed.

The theoretical construct developed in this chapter is characterized by approximation. Words like *can*, *may*, and *perhaps* have been used repeatedly. There is, however, reason to bear in mind Sutton-Smith's warning that one should not rely too heavily on theories when studying play and games. His own studies made it clear how the different widespread and collective perceptions of what play is and how it should be carried out are permeated by power and ideology. The collective ideas about different play activities form cultural hierarchies, in which some activities attain dominant positions and others are given subordinate roles. While people tend to hold the play forms in which they themselves participate in high esteem, those to which they are outsiders are generally considered to be of low value (Sutton-Smith 1997, 204–7). The play and ritual researcher should therefore access sources with a probing attitude and without expectations that are too narrow. Good empirical legwork is the necessary underpinning for clearer, more tenable ideas. Still, there is much to gain if our efforts lead to more reliable drafts of the simmering waters of tension and imagination that lie in between the oceans of play and ritual.

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