

## 5 The dangers and opportunities of playful consumption

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A bar owner's business was doing poorly. Desperate for patrons, the owner put a sign in the bar's window with the following challenge: "Eat 50 Eggs in 15 Minutes and Drink Free for a Month." Within days, consumers from all over town were visiting the bar to cheer for contestants and enjoy the spectacle. Some contestants tried to eat the 50 eggs boiled, others attempted scrambled, and some even tried to drink them raw from an enormous pitcher. But none could win the prize. One evening a stranger entered the now bustling bar. "Does it matter what kind of eggs?" the stranger asked. "Nope," said the owner proudly, "we've had everything from fried to poached." "Excellent," said the now smiling stranger, who pulled out a jar of caviar and, with one large spoonful, was the toast of the bar for a month.

The "stranger" in the above story is an archetypal figure who has been depicted in stories and jokes for centuries. Known to folklore scholars as "the Trickster," this character appears in different guises throughout the world and goes by names as diverse as Loki, Coyote, Hermes, and the Monkey King (Radin 1956; Pelton 1980; Roberts 1989; Hynes 1993; Smith 1997). Although different Trickster stories have different characters and plots, they all often illustrate the important but sometimes subtle difference between playing *by* the rules and playing *with* the rules. At the start of the above story, the bar's consumers are willing to play by the explicit and implied rules set up by the bar owner, resulting in not only value to them but also more business for the bar owner. But at the end of the story, the stranger plays with one of the implied rules (the rule that "eggs" means chicken eggs), thus enjoying a different kind of value from the interaction – one that is not as conducive to the bar owner's business. Trickster stories emphasize that although play is often associated with fun, teamwork, and cooperation, it has an equally strong association with trouble-making, mischief, and deception.

Researchers – myself included – have found the concept of play to be as elusive as any Trickster (Deighton and Grayson 1995; Grayson and Deighton 1995). Play has attracted the attention of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, literary theorists, performance theorists, and even neurophysiologists. Their efforts have produced a wide and disparate body of scholarship on play that, in the words of Bende and Grastyán (1992: 271), would be "discouraging" and "hopeless" to

review thoroughly. In the face of this ever-expanding literature, Schechner (1993: 24) goes so far as to suggest an academic moratorium on defining play, pointing to Victor Turner's assertion that play is "categorically uncategorizable." But just as Tom Sawyer (Mark Twain's Trickster) made painting a fence seem irresistible to his friends, play has a way of making itself seem irresistible to academics. Even Schechner (*ibid.*), after suggesting his moratorium, presents six "templates" against which play should be measured. And despite my growing appreciation for the ineffability of play, I nonetheless try in this chapter to explain its relevance to marketers and consumers.

## **Play and Holbrook's typology**

The challenge (and perhaps therefore the attraction) of studying play is that the word can be used in so many different ways. Playing a role is different from playing a piano. Playing around is different from playing to win. Playing along with someone is different from playing into their hands. Despite these multiple uses of the word, Huizinga (1950) argues that there is an essential similarity between these seemingly different types of play. In his influential book on play, he discerns a common play element in almost every human activity – from law, gambling, and war, to poetry, mythology, and philosophy. Applied to marketing, this observation points to the useful conclusion that, given the right perspective on the part of the consumer, nearly every product or service might be sold or consumed as play. This is Holbrook's (1994) stance regarding not just play, but also all other types of consumer value. Anything – a silk tie, for example – can be valued for its efficiency, its morality, its esthetics, or, indeed, its playfulness.

How can such diverse market offerings as amusement parks, legal services, tennis clubs, and television dramas each offer playful consumer value? Holbrook (*ibid.*) answers this question by defining playful value as that which is intrinsically motivating, self-oriented, and active. The consumption of something like an amusement park easily fits this tri-dimensional definition of play, but even consuming something such as legal services can be playful. For example, a defendant in a legal trial might inherently enjoy participating in trial strategy discussions, learning to play the appropriate courtroom role, or meeting the challenge of being questioned by the prosecution. When a client is actively participating in the activity for its own sake, this is playful consumption.

Despite the many differences among published definitions of play, there is fairly consistent agreement among scholars about the three dimensions that Holbrook uses to define play. For instance, most scholars agree that an activity is not play unless it is pursued for its own sake (Rainwater 1922; Mitchell and Mason 1937: 13; Huizinga 1950: 13; Fink 1968: 20; Garvey 1977: 2; Monighan-Nourrot *et al.* 1987: 16; Holt 1995). The enjoyment derived from play is not described by researchers as that which comes from helping others or making others feel good, but as a self-oriented reward such as "fun" (Huizinga *ibid.*: 7), "happiness" (Fink *ibid.*), or "joy" (Lieberman 1977: 19). Lastly, play is commonly characterized as requiring active engagement – although scholars have

tended to focus on the mental, rather than physical, engagement of the player (Huizinga *ibid.*: 13; Goffman 1961: 38; Garvey *ibid.*: 5; Monighan-Nourot *et al. ibid.*: 15). Moving a chess piece takes much less physical activity than tackling a quarterback, but both activities can provide comparable amounts of playful value.

Accepting this basic definition, it might initially seem that a marketer should always encourage consumer play. After all, what negative consequences could come from providing consumers with the opportunity to engage in a self-oriented, intrinsically rewarding activity? Answering this question requires a deeper understanding of the different types of play that consumers might enjoy. While Holbrook's (1994) typology is useful in distinguishing play from other types of value, it does not (nor does it aim to) distinguish between different types of play. The next section does this by relying on an additional definitional dimension of play: the relationship of the activity to the social rules of the situation.

### **The importance of social rules in defining play**

A number of social scientists have observed that a prerequisite for everyday social relations is a shared understanding or consensus among interactants about the rules governing the interaction. Goffman (1959) calls this a "definition of the situation." His concept is similar to James's (1890) "subuniverse of reality;" Wittgenstein's (1953) "language game" (see also Lyotard 1979); and Schutz and Luckmann's (1973) "finite province of meaning." Each of these terms refers to the perception that social life is subdivided into different spheres, each of which is governed by different rules. Interactants sometimes disagree about the rules governing a situation (Grayson 1998), but what is remarkable about everyday interaction is that – by attending to cues in the environment and to nonverbal signals sent by the other interactants – even a group of complete strangers can achieve a "working consensus" about the rules without having to address them explicitly in the interaction (Goffman 1959: 9–10). This consensus occurs despite the fact that, in any given day, interactants move through successive situational definitions (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 24) and often operate at the intersection of several definitions (Lyotard 1979: 15; Wittgenstein 1953: 11–12).

For example, consider the multiple situational definitions faced by a man visiting a hospital. He will move from interacting with a front-desk clerk to a receptionist, to a nurse, and finally to a doctor – and each of these interactions carries with it a different situational definition. Furthermore, when participating in these interactions, the customer must not only meet the situational rules imposed on him because he is a patient, but also those imposed because he is a man, a husband, a father, etc. At the same time, all of these interactions will share some similar rules that fall under the situational heading of "visiting a hospital" and visiting a hospital will share some rules that apply to all service situations. In almost every social situation we are faced with a similarly complex set of expectations. But thanks to our exposure to countless social encounters during our

lives, we gain an instinctual appreciation for the most appropriate behaviors in different situations, and can therefore operate successfully in them.

The expected sets of behaviors associated with each definition of the situation are called “roles” (Goffman 1959, 1961; Zurcher 1983, Solomon *et al.* 1985). Role expectations are sets of beliefs and subjective probabilities that interactants have about the appropriate conduct for individuals occupying a particular position within a given situation (Sarbin and Allen 1968: 498). They are the rules that different individuals must follow given a particular definition of a situation. Not everyone’s role in a given situation will be the same. In the hospital example above, the role expectations for patient, nurse, doctor, etc. are different. Thus, many situations comprise a “role set” (Merton 1957), which is a group of complementary roles that are required for a situation to unfold successfully. The concept of a role set implies that once a particular role in a situation is defined, this has implications for the other roles that are also expected in the situation.

However, unlike theatrical roles, social roles do not rigidly routinize expectations but instead help interactants to balance between the conflicting requirements of routinization and contextualization in social interaction. As Athay and Darley explain:

Roles “structure” interaction in the sense of imposing normative limits on the possibilities of variation, but they do not determine particular courses of action in the sense of laying down exact prescriptions of what to do when. The limitations they impose on thought and action are exceedingly strong ones, to the point that actors normally find it very difficult to see themselves as deviating. But the boundaries are so formulated as to incorporate a high degree of indeterminacy, permitting enormously varying patterns of action to count as instantiations of the role-specified behaviors.

(1982: 76)

Thus, role expectations include certain very specific role-forbidden and role-required behaviors; and at the same time leave open a range of role-possible actions from which consumers may choose (see also Sarbin and Allen 1968: 503; and Secord 1982: 35). For example, when an individual is empathetically counselling a friend about a serious personal problem, a cough is likely to be viewed by both parties as role-possible – not something that is required or forbidden by the role, but certainly something that is allowed. On the other hand, a yawn is likely to be viewed as role forbidden because it carries the possibility of communicating boredom. Thus, the counsellor may try to stifle a yawn more than she would try to stifle a cough – or may try to yawn at a time when the friend does not see it. A yawn is role-possible only if the counsellor can show how the behavior does not conflict with role expectations, for example by explaining that she is tired because she was up all night worrying about the friend’s problem.

My brief summary of role theory provides a foundation for presenting the central assertion of this chapter:

*Play is always enacted in relation to a definition of a situation. It involves either following or deviating from the situation's role expectations (or a combination of both).*

Indeed, not every instance of following or deviating from social expectations will be playful. As emphasized earlier, whether or not an activity is playful depends on whether or not the activity is considered by the individual to be intrinsically motivated, self-oriented, and active. This means that play is not dependent on the activity *per se*, but on the person's attitude toward the activity. Even an everyday chore can be thought of as play and even a game of hopscotch can be considered not-play. As Mitchell and Mason assert:

There is no particular activity, be it baseball, fishing, playing with dolls, that is always necessarily play; neither can an activity be mentioned that may not under some conditions be play. When one runs a foot race, drives a car, rows a boat, or reads a book, it may be play or not, depending on the way he thinks and feels about it.

(1924: 88)

Thus, accepting that the focus of this chapter is on intrinsically motivated, self-oriented activities, these can be distinguished from one another on a continuum that ranges from following situational rules to applying new rules (and applying new rules often means breaking old ones). The continuum from rule-following to rule-breaking is an important element of Caillois's (1979) typology of play, which I adapt to a role-theory perspective in the remainder of this section.

### ***From ludus to paida: a continuum of play***

At the rule-following end of the continuum is what Caillois (*ibid.*) calls *ludus*, which is the Latin word for play or game. *Ludus* involves playfully following arbitrary, imperative, and purposely limiting conventions (Caillois *ibid.*: 13). For example, a basketball player might at some point in the game want to tuck the ball under her arm and make a run for the basket. However, the arbitrary, imperative, and limiting convention of having to dribble or pass the ball is part of the social definition of basketball. While basketball is a good prototypical example of *ludus*, the conventions of almost every social situation are not theoretically different from basketball's conventions. Consider, for example, shopping at a retail store. A buyer who walks into a store knowing what he wants may wish to pay at the register before taking his merchandise from the shelf. However, in most retail stores, the arbitrary, imperative, and limiting conventions of shopping require the buyer to bring the merchandise to the register in order to pay for it. This role expectation may be so familiar to us that it seems like the "logical" way to do things, but retail shopping really doesn't have to be done that way. For example, the Argos chain of stores in the United Kingdom requires consumers to pick an item out of a catalogue and pay for it at the cash register before having it handed to them at a delivery desk.

My point is not only that explicit rules govern most social interactions, but also that following these rules can be, and often is, intrinsically motivating. This motivation comes from the sheer enjoyment of having and using an "interaction competency" (Athay and Darley 1982). Not having the right competency to operate in a social situation can be awkward and unpleasant. For example, those who travel to a foreign country sometimes find that because they do not know the appropriate social rules, even mundane activities such as shopping can be difficult. However, once a consumer has gained competence in shopping at a foreign marketplace, he or she may enjoy intrinsic value simply by operating according to the rules of the situation. This is the same kind of reward that one gets from being able to step confidently into a pick-up basketball game, interact successfully in a foreign language, or participate appropriately in a religious ceremony. Each of these activities may provide additional types of value, but this does not negate their potential for ludic value, which is the enjoyment of successfully following the rules.

On the other hand, the existence of expectations does not mean that they will be met. Nothing physical keeps a basketball player from running with the ball or a retail shopper from trying to pay for items before bringing them to the register. However, because these behaviors are not part of the situation's role expectations, they are at best role irrelevant and at worst rule forbidden, in which case a referee or store manager is likely to intervene. When these role-breaking behaviors are intrinsically motivated and self-oriented, they fall toward the other end of Caillois's (1979) play continuum, which is anchored by *paida*. In its purest form, *paida* (which is the demotic Greek word for child) is characterized by free improvisation, carefree gaiety, and uncontrolled fantasy (Caillois *ibid.*: 13), all three of which involve behaving without regard for role expectations. Such behaviors can certainly be done for extrinsic reasons such as annoying teammates or speeding up the shopping process. But they are playful when they are performed simply for the fun of it.

Before moving on to examine *ludus* and *paida* in more detail, it is useful to note that Caillois (*ibid.*) is not the only researcher to use rules as a way of distinguishing between different types of play. For example, Garvey (1977) contrasts "play" with "games," describing the former as "spontaneous and voluntary" (p. 5) and the latter as requiring "acceptance of and adherence to a particular set of rules" (p. 104). Similarly, Goffman (1974: 57) argues that objects in play are "quite temporary, never fully established," whereas in games they are "institutionalized – stabilized as it were – just as the arena of action is fixed by the formal rules of activity." Still other scholars have referred to the rule dimension of play, but have focused more on *paida* than on *ludus*. For example, play is described as an activity that "permits freedom of action [and] diversion from routines" (Caplan and Caplan 1973), provides "freedom from external rules" (Monighan-Nourot *et al.* 1987: 18) and is "determined at a given time by the somatic structure and the social attitudes of the agent" (Rainwater 1922: 217).

## Seven ways in which 'X' can play with 'Y'

Caillois's continuum emphasizes that play is not a unitary phenomenon but instead comes in many guises. This section and the next more closely examine the different types of play. My purpose in presenting a detailed typology of play is twofold. First, I wish to emphasize that although playful activities share some common attributes, the concept of play actually encompasses an extremely wide range of very different activities. Second, as I will show in a later section, marketers and consumers will react differently to different types of playful activity, and so it is important to determine which type of play is being enacted in a consumption situation.

Although accounts of marginalized consumers (e.g., Eisen 1988) have shown that people do not need a marketer's intervention in order to play, the focus of this chapter is on playful value that involves a marketer's products, services, or representatives. This kind of playful value can come from three types of interactions. A consumer may, with the help of the marketer, play with another consumer. Alternatively, a consumer may play with the marketer. Lastly, a marketer may play with the consumer. To capture these different types of play interactions, Figure 5.1 outlines four different kinds of ludus and three different kinds of paida. As the figure indicates, all of the definitions assume that an individual (X) is directly or indirectly playing with someone else (Y). It is against Y's definition of the situation that X's play is defined. Y may also be playing in relation to X's definition of the situation, but the focus remains on X's actions, not Y's. This figure facilitates an analysis of how a consumer might play with another consumer or with a marketer; and how a marketer might play with a consumer. However, to simplify my exposition, X will be regarded in this section as a consumer and Y as a marketer.

In the lower portion of the figure, four types of ludus are described. At the very bottom is "competition," an activity in which the consumer competently fulfills the marketer's role expectations and in which these expectations include adopting goals that conflict with the marketer. For example, the goal of consumers at an auction is to pay as little as possible, but the goal of the auctioneer is to achieve the highest prices. And yet participating in an auction can provide considerable playful value for some consumers (see also Schindler 1995). The next type of play is "participation," which is similar to competition except that the consumer and marketer have complementary goals within the activity. Many tropical vacation-resort communities create environments in which consumers may playfully participate. When, at these resorts, a consumer steps into a pair of water skis, attends a dance aerobics class, or joins a hike in the mountains, both consumer and marketer have similar goals for the activity.

With both competition and participation, the consumer is competently and fully meeting role expectations. The next two types of ludus, "initiation" and "imitation," are those for which the consumer meets only a subset of the role expectations. Consumers undergoing initiation would like to fulfill all of the role expectations, but cannot do so because they do not yet have the competence



<b>Paída</b>	X performs behaviors that conflict with Y's definition of the situation, but X keeps this conflict hidden from Y ( <i>Deception</i> )
	X performs behaviors that conflict with Y's definition of the situation, and X does not keep this conflict hidden from Y ( <i>Subversion</i> )
	X performs situationally relevant behaviors that are not included in Y's definition of the situation, but that also do not conflict with that definition ( <i>Innovation</i> )
<b>Ludus</b>	X fulfills a subset of role expectations dictated by Y's definition of the situation for the purpose of referring to this role ( <i>Imitation</i> )
	X fulfills a subset of role expectations dictated by Y's definition of the situation for the purpose of gaining a role competence ( <i>Initiation</i> )
	X completely fulfills role expectations dictated by Y's definition of the situation and, within the situation, X's goals are complementary with Y's ( <i>Participation</i> )
	X completely fulfills role expectations dictated by Y' definition of the situation and, within the situation, X's goals conflict with Y's ( <del><i>Completion</i></del> )( <i>Competition</i> )

Figure 5.1 Seven ways in which 'X' can play with 'Y'

Note: \* refers to intrinsically motivating, self-oriented, active consumption

or status. For example, when consumers embark on a path toward consumer socialization (Moschis 1985), they are engaging in initiation. In contrast, consumers engaging in "imitation" are not striving to play the role competently, but instead want to refer to the role for rhetorical or representational purposes. For instance, consumers are imitating when they wear a style of clothing worn by a prominent company spokesperson.

Moving to the upper portion of Figure 5.1, three types of paída are described. Each of these involves the consumer performing behaviors that, according to the marketer's definition of the situation, are role-possible or role-forbidden. First, there is "innovation," in which the consumer's behaviors are situationally relevant, not included in the marketer's definition of the situation, but not conflicting with this definition either. For example, a hotel customer who makes his hotel bed and cleans his own hotel bathroom is performing situationally relevant, but not role-forbidden behavior. It is situationally relevant, because it affects the way in which the housekeeper will fulfill his or her role expectations.



However, if the customer is doing these activities just for the enjoyment of doing them, his behavior is not likely to be seen as conflicting with the marketer's definition of the situation and therefore counts as an innovation.

In contrast, for the remaining two types of *paida*, the consumer's behaviors do conflict with the marketer's definition of the situation. If the consumer does not seek to hide this conflict, the activity is "subversion." Some music celebrities are notorious for breaking hotel role expectations by making considerable noise and damaging fixtures – behavior that they frequently display proudly. On the other hand, if the consumer does hide this conflict from the marketer, the activity is "deception." A consumer who gains playful value from stealing bathrobes or towels from a hotel room will not do so in view of the marketer.

In fact, there is a type of ludic play, which Schechner (1993: 36–9) calls "dark play," that depends on being deceptive. Dark play keeps the role conflict hidden but requires the active involvement of others who believe there is no role conflict. For example, pranks and practical jokes require "nonplayers" whose reactions are "a big part of what gives dark play its kick" (*ibid.*: 38). Although Biesty (1986) points out that dark play is often implemented to achieve extrinsic goals like status in a peer group, this does not preclude the possibility that dark play may also be intrinsically enjoyable to some. At the same time, Biesty's point highlights the fact that an individual can engage in what looks like playful activity, but which is not really intrinsically motivating. This behavior can be called "false play" (Huizinga 1950: 208). For example, a clown at a circus may appear to be playfully engaging with children, but may view this activity only as extrinsically motivated – that is, a way to earn a living.

A last type of play should be mentioned, which is raised in Geertz's (1976) oft-cited anthropological study of a Balinese cockfight. Geertz revives Jeremy Bentham's (1802) concept of "deep play" to describe playful-seeming activities where the stakes on both sides are actually very serious. Although a Balinese cockfight might appear to be playful competition, important issues of status and considerable sums of money are generally at stake. This is parallel to Turner's (1982) observation that although some tribal rituals may seem to involve participants who break rules for the transcendent experience of doing so, these participants are actually enacting required behaviors which help to maintain very important relations and functions in the community at large.

In sum, with dark play, X is playing with Y but appears not to be. With false play, X appears to be playing with Y but is not intrinsically motivated by the activity and so is not really playing. And with deep play, both X and Y appear to be playing with one another but the stakes are so high that they are both extrinsically motivated by the activity. Of these, only dark play can be truly playful because it is the only type that can have a strong intrinsic motivation.

### **Further contextualizing the different types of play**

Although the typology in Figure 5.1 presents seven clear categories of play, few playful activities will be wholly defined by any one of these categories. The

playful value enjoyed by a consumer at a golfing range, for example, may move in sequence from participation (hitting the ball normally) to initiation (trying out a new swing learned from a golf video), to innovation (hitting the ball with the wrong side of the club), etc. Furthermore, what is experienced by the consumer as one type of play may from a marketer's perspective be another kind. For instance, one of the implicit role expectations for extended service encounters like white-water rafting is that the relationships between consumers and marketers become more "boundary open," providing scope for a wider range of role-possible behaviors (Price *et al.* 1995: 88-9). Consumers may see these boundary-open behaviors as innovative because they appear to break the role expectations implicit in service encounters. However, from the perspective of the marketer's definition of the situation, these behaviors amount to participation because they fit right into the role expectation for consumers in these encounters.

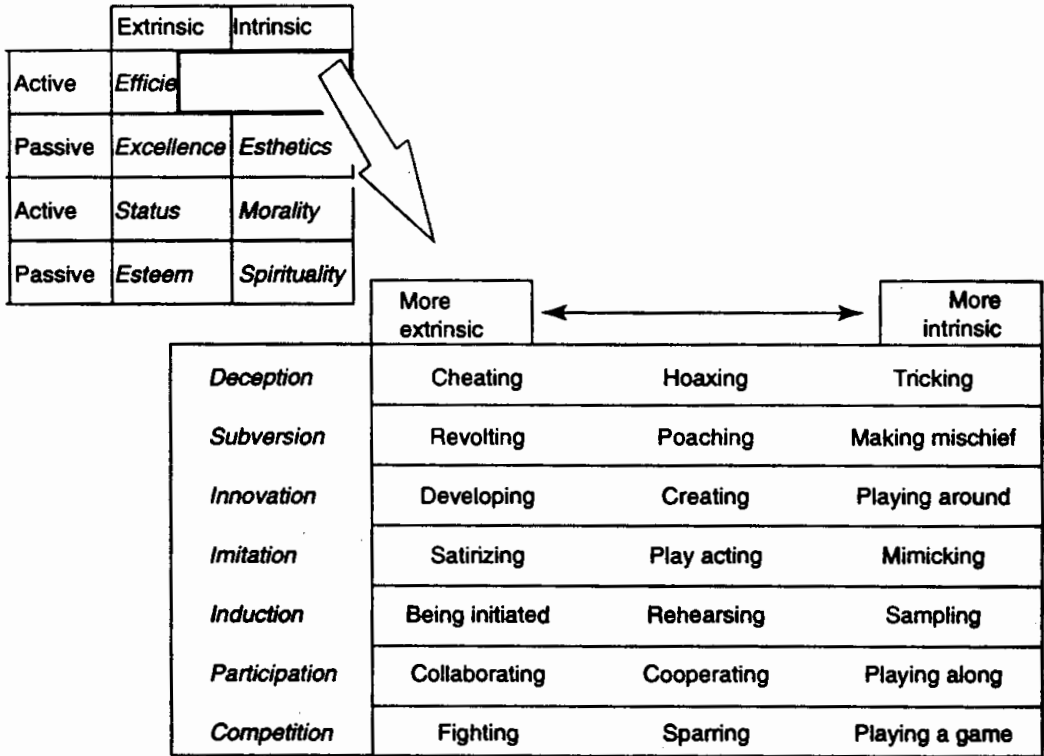


Figure 5.2 Playful consumption in context

Each of the seven definitions of play in Figure 5.1 also inherently includes a continuum of playful activity that ranges from more intrinsic to more extrinsic. These continua are illustrated in Figure 5.2, which further contextualizes different types of play in relation to one another and further emphasizes that play exists on a continuum rather than within a strictly bounded category (see also Goffman 1974: 48-82). In the figure, each of the seven types of play is represented by a row. The three words in each row are situated according to how intrinsically or extrinsically motivated they tend to be.

### ***More intrinsically motivated activities***

Listed in the column on the right (under the “more intrinsic” heading) are activities that, because of their strong intrinsic motivation, are the most playful. Thus, the words in this column were chosen to capture the most playful aspects of the seven types. For example, the most playful type of subversion is “making mischief,” a phrase that is evocative of the kind of intrinsic motivation that is sometimes associated with clearly breaking the rules. As another example, the most playful type of innovation is “playing around,” which reflects the fun of performing new behaviors that do not necessarily conflict with the definition of the situation – or “playing along” which is the fun of following the rules. Similarly, “mimicking,” “sampling,” “tricking,” and “playing a game” all refer respectively to intrinsically motivated imitation, initiation, deception and competition.

### ***More extrinsically motivated activities***

In contrast, the activities in the column on the left under the “more extrinsic” heading can be so extrinsically motivated that they should not even be categorized as play. For example, “developing” and “collaborating” are words usually used in relation to a project with an extrinsic purpose. And “satirizing” usually means imitating someone for the extrinsic purpose of causing discomfort or making a critical point. “Competing,” “cheating,” and “revolting” are also activities that are generally associated with attaining a specific goal rather than experiencing enjoyment of a particular activity for its own sake.

### ***Activities that combine motivations***

In the middle of the figure is a column of activities that combine both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. A “hoax,” for example, is often used to refer to a preposterous type of deception motivated in part by a mischievous intent. And “sparring” is a type of competition whose consequences are not wholly serious and whose motivations are therefore less extrinsic. “Poaching” is a term coined by de Certeau (1984) to refer primarily to consumer adaptation of products, ideas, and texts to serve their own needs. One example is the way in which native South Americans adapted the rituals of Spanish colonizers to serve their own belief systems (ibid.: xiii). Although the natives were extrinsically motivated because of the Spanish imperative that the rituals be adopted, they were also intrinsically motivated to make the rituals work for them.

### **The dangers and opportunities of paidic consumption**

Looking at the different types of play listed in Figure 5.1, it becomes easy to see why play – paidic play in particular – may not always be a desirable value for a marketer to foster. To examine more closely the potentially negative impact of rule-breaking playful value, consider consumer behavior on the “Splash Mountain”

ride at the Disneyland amusement park in Los Angeles. At the top of one of the steepest hills on the ride, Disney has placed a digital camera that takes pictures of consumers just as they start to hurtle downward. These pictures are made available as souvenirs for consumers at the end of the ride. Knowing this, some mischievous female consumers bare their breasts on the ride just at the point where the photo is taken. The resulting photographs typically are intercepted and destroyed by Disneyland employees who screen the photos before they are made available to the public. However, some of the pictures make it through the screen and are bought by consumers. And several photos have made their way to a web site called "Flash Mountain."

When a consumer's behavior conflicts with a marketer's expectations, the marketer is threatened in four related ways. First, the exchange between the marketer and the rule-breaker becomes more uncertain for both parties. In the Flash Mountain example, the rule-breakers are never sure whether their photo will be screened out or made available at the end of the ride. And Disney management is never sure which Splash Mountain consumers are using the ride for paidic playful value. When consumers are not sure whether or not their hopes for a product or service will be met, and when marketers are not sure how consumers will behave, the likelihood of consumer satisfaction diminishes, as does the potential for a profitable business.

Secondly, when a consumer engages in paidic consumption, the nature of the relationship between the marketer and the rule-breaker changes. Because successful exchange relationships generally depend on each party's fulfillment of role expectations, marketing exchange often requires that each party trust the other to meet these obligations (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994). But in the Flash Mountain example, the roller-coaster flashers gain value not by playing by the rules of the ride, but by playing with these rules. Rather than enjoying the kind of wholesome fun that Disney tends to encourage and expect at Disneyland, these consumers enjoy a more illicit value. Because this is not behavior that Disney wants to invite (or perhaps even allow) at the park, it undermines the trust that the company may have in these consumers and therefore changes the nature of the relationship between the company and these consumers.

Thirdly, rule-breaking consumers may affect the relationship that the marketer has with other consumers. For example, Disney's brand image among its core consumers may be negatively affected by its association with the Flash Mountain web site. In the feedback section of the site, one consumer (who appears to believe that the site is sponsored by Disney) commented that:

I don't agree that this should be posted anywhere on the Internet. It is very degrading to women, not to mention the fact that Disneyland could easily have a lawsuit on their hands as a result of this. Please take this off the Internet! If I had kids, I would not take them to Disneyland for any reason.

Questions also arise regarding the potential negative effect that flashers may have on other consumers riding on Splash Mountain. Although some may accept this

behavior with equanimity or even enthusiasm, others – particularly parents of small children – may be angry that the flashers' behavior clearly breaks with the family-entertainment expectations set up by Disney.

A final problem with consumers who break the rules is that they may encourage others to similarly flout marketers' expectations, with potentially exacerbated consequences. For example, the Flash Mountain web site encourages consumers to send their own photos in for publication on the site. One consumer on the website's feedback section expressed her intention to get a photo with everyone on the ride flashing the camera. For Disney, one or two flashers is a minor nuisance, while whole carloads of flashing consumers may require changes in policy or in the management of the ride.

### *Marketer response options*

When consumers engage in role-forbidden behavior, the marketer has two potential response options (aside from ignoring it). First, the marketer may maintain the current definition of the situation and therefore re-assert or re-clarify the role expectation in an attempt to keep the behavior from happening again. Secondly, the marketer may change the definition of the situation to allow the behavior as role possible or role-required in future interactions.

The first option – reasserting role expectations – usually means attempting to assert greater control over those who break the expectations. For example, when free "fanzines" about the popular Star Wars series of films were developed, Lucasfilm (the owner of the Star Wars brand) sought to control these publications, seeing them as rivals to their official fan organization. And when some of these fanzines depicted the Star Wars characters in situations that diverted from what were perceived to be the films' "family values," Lucas threatened to sue (Jenkins 1992: 31). Similarly, the management of Oasis, one of the United Kingdom's most successful rock groups in the 1990s, sent a formal warning to dozens of unofficial free Oasis web sites threatening to take legal action unless they stopped making unauthorized use of photographs, lyrics, video clips, and music samples (Rawsthorn 1997). And Disney has responded to roller-coaster flashers by tightening security procedures and adding more staff to screen photos and to monitor the ride more closely (CNN 1997).

While there is a potential cost associated with allowing consumers to engage in role-forbidden behavior, there are also potential costs to reasserting role expectations. These involve not only legal and administrative costs, but also the danger that mischievous behavior might turn into revolutionary behavior. Activities done primarily for the fun of it might turn into activities with an extrinsic motivation such as forcing a company to change its definition of the situation. For example, in response to the Oasis management's actions mentioned above, a new web site called Oasis Webmasters for Internet Freedom was launched to orchestrate a protest campaign and to advise other sites not to comply (Rawsthorn 1997). The negative impact and cost of this more extrinsically motivated behavior may be greater than that of the original more intrinsically motivated behavior.

The second option available in response to a rule-breaking consumer is for the marketer to redefine the behavior as rule-possible or even rule-required. For instance, ski resorts for many years did not allow consumers to use snowboards – initially because they were thought to be dangerous, but eventually because the culture associated with the sport did not fit within the situational definition of many ski resorts (Harverson 1997; Weatley 1997). However, the growing popularity of the sport eventually convinced many marketers that snowboarding was a creative innovation, not a threatening subversion. By 1998, snowboarding had become mainstream enough to be included as an event in the Winter Olympic Games as an officially role-possible activity. This meant that those associated with the games, from reporters to judges, had to include a number of new role-possible behaviors in their role expectations for Olympic competitors, including certain clothing styles and even the use of marijuana (Wilbon 1998).

Snowboarding is a good example of how paidic activity can be the source of new ideas for the marketer, even if the behavior first seems to conflict with the marketer's definition of the situation. Lessons learned by snowboarders and snowboard manufacturers have even encouraged innovation in the manufacturing of standard snow skis (Houlder 1997). The idea that play can be the source of innovation is at heart of Victor Turner's (1982) concept of "liminoid" activities, which are marginalized but playful rule-breaking behaviors that often provide a spark for changes in the mainstream culture. For instance, Disney now operates entertainment areas for adults, including "Pleasure Island" at Walt Disney World in Orlando and "Disney Village" at Disneyland Paris. One can imagine that the idea for these entertainment areas came from Disney's encounters with more "adult" behaviors (like those on Splash Mountain) at their family-oriented parks. At the adult-oriented parks, behaviors that are generally role-forbidden at other Disney parks (such as drinking considerable amounts of alcohol) are role-possible. For consumers, this removes the sheer fun of breaking the rules but also diminishes the uncertainty of whether or not their behavior will be sanctioned.

To summarize, encouraging paidic consumer value can be dangerous for a marketer because this kind of consumer play increases the uncertainty of the consumption situation. But it can also offer opportunities for the marketer, not only because it can provide a unique type of value for consumers but also because it can be a source of new ideas for additional kinds of value. Therefore, marketers who encourage paida must have a greater-than-average tolerance for unexpected and even unwanted consumer behavior. For example, on one of its web sites, the Shell company has a section dedicated to "sensitive subjects" where consumers may participate in a "speaker's corner" by posting their messages. To the company's credit, a considerable amount of behavior that other marketers might sanction is allowed in the Shell speaker's corner, including criticizing the company's environmental policies and political activities, complaining about company service, and posting satirical cartoons about the company.

Nonetheless, every marketer draws the line somewhere, and certain playful behaviors are not encouraged on the Shell site. Consider the exchange reproduced

below, which is taken verbatim from the web site (with e-mail addresses removed), regarding a conflict between Shell and Greenpeace, the environmental advocacy group. It begins with one consumer (Claus O-J) advising Shell to simply ignore Greenpeace:

Date: 12 Mar.1997 (Wed) – 21:56

Author: Claus O-J

Message: Dump that thing, and forget about Greenpeace stupid advices. They don't know what to do anyway, except from making money.

Date: 15 Mar.1997 (Fri) – 22:21

Author: Shell

Message: Your right!!

Date: 18 Mar.1997 (Tue) – 10:01

Author: WEBMASTER

Message: Please note that this posting was not made by anybody from the Shell organisation. Could I ask that people wishing to use these forums use at least credible pseudonyms and not a name like the one used here. Thanks, Simon May.

The context and content of the second message suggest that the author was at least partially motivated by the intrinsic rewards of playfully thumbing one's nose at a large multi-national petroleum company – a role behavior that the Shell webmaster did not wish to include in his definition of a participant in the speaker's corner.

Having addressed the ways in which rule-breaking consumers may threaten the relationship between a marketer and a consumer, it is useful to note that marketers can encourage consumers to break rules set by *other* marketers, thus insulating themselves from some of the potentially negative results of paida. For example, a margarine manufacturer might encourage consumers to “counterbrand” (Chang 1997) its product by putting it in a butter tub – just for the fun of seeing whether or not other family members notice the difference. While butter manufacturers probably would prefer not to have their brands exposed to the potential of being associated with margarine taste, the margarine manufacturer may potentially benefit by encouraging this playful activity.

As another example, consider Howies, a London-based manufacturer whose line of clothing includes T-shirts specifically designed to set off security alarm systems when entering or leaving stores. Its “Shoplifter” T-shirt sold out completely last year, and the company has therefore manufactured a larger number of the new design this year (*Time Out* 1998). While these T-shirts are likely to cause consternation among some retailers, the negative impact of this paidic consumer behavior is unlikely to directly affect the manufacturer. However, there is still the potential that some retailers (or other stakeholders) will not find these articles of clothing playful at all, and may press to outlaw such clothing or pursue other



sanctions against Howies. This potential consequence of the Shoplifter T-shirt raises the issue of how a particular playful behavior is defined, which is the topic of the following section.

### **The importance of defining playful activity**

The previous section illustrated that marketers who wish to offer playful value to consumers must make some important decisions about the extent to which this value will be paidic or ludic. In this section, I will consider whether the finer distinctions offered in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 are useful from a managerial or research perspective. In other words, while there is value in distinguishing between ludus and paida, is there any value in distinguishing between competition and participation or between sparring and cooperating?

To answer this question, let us consider how one might categorize the actions of the stranger in the story told at the outset of this chapter. Looking at Figure 5.1, it could be argued that the stranger in the story was engaging in *innovative* behavior. The use of fish eggs was not included in the bar owner's definition of the situation, but neither was it explicitly forbidden. Or maybe the stranger was being *deceptive* – why else were the fish eggs kept hidden until after the bartender had agreed that the kind of eggs did not matter? Furthermore, turning to Figure 5.2, there is the further question of whether the stranger's activities were extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. On one hand, perhaps the stranger was extrinsically motivated by the desire to drink free for a month or to make the bar owner look silly. On the other hand, perhaps the stranger was intrinsically motivated by the sheer enjoyment of playing around or making mischief.

These questions bring us back to the Mitchell and Mason (1934: 88) quotation cited earlier, which asserted that play depends on the way in which the player feels about the activity. Thus, deciding what kind of play the stranger was enacting is simply a matter of asking the stranger. However, while this view emphasizes the importance of human perception in making judgments about social actions, it suggests that a definition of social behavior can be made unilaterally. This may be true for the examples they cite, such as rowing a boat or reading a book, which are not social interactions. However, for more social playful activities, a mutual consensus about roles and situational definitions is an important pre-requisite for smooth social interaction. In other words, the meaning of a consumption situation is rarely decided by one person and is instead a negotiation between marketer, consumer, and the broader social reality in which the consumption takes place (Deighton and Grayson 1995). For instance, what if the stranger felt that the introduction of fish eggs was a fun way to be innovative (playing around) while the bar owner felt that it was a deceptive way to get free drinks for a month (cheating)? Despite the stranger's belief that the activity was playful, dissensus about the stranger's role could result in a conflict with serious outcomes for either or both parties.

Turning back to the real-world Flash Mountain example, a male consumer claimed on the website that, having flashed his genitals on the ride, he found

Disney security waiting for him at the end of the ride and faced legal proceedings that resulted in eight hours of required community service. The consumer may have thought that he was simply playing around like the female consumers on the ride – or perhaps even playing the game according to the pre-established rules. However, Disney's definition of the consumer's behavior as subversive (and, apparently, the broader social reality's similar determination) meant that the consumer did not on the whole enjoy value from the exchange.

Thus, it is in many cases extremely important for marketers and consumers to distinguish among the finer types of playful activity. This is because once a role definition has been decided for one party, this implies certain role expectations from the other. A marketer may be expected to tolerate a little playing around on the part of consumers, but is usually expected to prohibit fighting or cheating. Because of the interactivity and interdependence inherent in social encounters, the marketer's ability to respond in a particular way depends on the way in which a consumer's actions are defined.

### **Conclusion: the marketer as trickster**

This chapter has emphasized that although play is often thought to be inherently enjoyable it is actually an exceedingly complex concept with sometimes paradoxical qualities. Play can be harmlessly pleasant or threateningly subversive, which means that there are at least two general types of playful consumer value: one in which consumers follow the rules expected by the marketer, and one in which they break the rules. Although rule-breaking consumer behavior offers extra challenges for marketers, it also offers an opportunity to provide unique consumer value and a greater potential for discovering potential consumer innovation. That said, it is sometimes difficult for consumers and marketers to agree whether or not a particular activity is rule-following or rule-breaking, and furthermore whether the activity is innovative, deceptive, etc. The definition of a given behavior is important because it has consequences for all exchange partners and for the outcome of the exchange.

Because the purpose of this chapter has been to address *consumer* value, the possibility that a *marketer* might also enjoy playful value has been addressed only briefly. However, at least since the story of Genesis was written, marketers and salespeople have been notorious for playing with the rules of consumption by playing around, making mischief, or engaging in trickery. Although marketing is often (extrinsically) motivated by profit, marketers and salespeople are often depicted as those who not only profit from playing with consumers but also simply enjoy doing so. Because of this, marketers have been described as modern-day incarnations of the Trickster archetype mentioned at the outset of this chapter (Lenz 1985: 1; Shorris 1994: 42). Given marketing's longstanding association with exchange (Bagozzi 1974; Kotler 1972), it is no surprise that change and exchange have historically been the Trickster's central areas of influence (Wadlington 1975: 6).

However, the basic principles and observations outlined in this chapter apply equally well to playful marketers as to playful consumers. Consider the example of Tango, a well-established range of fruit-flavored carbonated soft drinks that historically has been sold in the United Kingdom using hilariously unorthodox advertisements. In 1994, the company ran an uncharacteristically straightforward advertisement in which the company's marketing director warned that some supermarkets and convenience stores were selling an unauthorized non-carbonated version of the company's beverage. Customers were told that if they saw this beverage on sale they should call a toll-free number to report the rogue distributor. On the first evening the commercial ran, a reported thirty thousand customers called the number and were told by a recorded message that they had been "Tango-ed" as part of a promotion for the company's new non-carbonated beverage called "Still Tango." Callers were also told that if they left their name and address they could receive a coupon for the new product (Summers 1994).

As with any paidic playfulness, the Tango advertising campaign raised some dangers for the company's relationships with its consumers. For example, it is likely that the advertisements changed the nature of the trust existing between Tango and its consumers – at least to the extent that these consumers will have heightened suspicion when viewing future Tango advertisements. In fact, the advertisement generated a larger-than-average number of complaints to the Independent Television Commission (ITC), which monitors deceptive and offensive television advertising in the UK. Furthermore, the advertisements also had a more general impact on consumers and members of the marketing community, many of whom raised concerns about whether or not Tango had exploited the credibility and authority of advertising media by playing with the rules of public service announcements and product recalls (Murphy 1994).

Thus, the company found itself in the position of a Splash Mountain flasher arguing over whether or not an activity was playful and, if so, what kind of play the activity represented. In its defense, the company explained that its target market was "advertising-aware" young adults who enjoyed Tango's "tongue-in-cheek" approach. In essence their argument was that, to Tango's target audience, the advertisements were simply an example of playing around. The ITC disagreed and asked that the advertisements be taken off the air, defining the advertisements as at best trickery and at worst a hoax: "If this was not quite setting off the fire alarm for a laugh," the Commission said in its decision, "it was certainly ringing door bells and running away."

Whether from the perspective of a marketer or a consumer, there are no easy solutions when it comes to defining play. It comes in many guises – and in each of its guises can be viewed in divergent ways by different consumers or marketers. However, even if a marketer wished to avoid playful value entirely, it is doubtful that this could be accomplished. As many scholars (e.g., Huizinga 1950; Eisen 1988) argue, human beings have an inherent desire to play – that is, to busy themselves with the workings of social rules and to find enjoyment by following or breaking these rules. This suggests that, no matter what the consumption situation, there will always be a consumer writing a rogue e-mail

message, using a product in an unconventional way, or pulling a jar of caviar from a coat pocket.

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