

Many splendored things: Sexuality, playfulness and play

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Abstract

This article makes a theoretical argument for the productivity of the notions of playfulness and play in feminist and queer studies of sexuality. Defined as a mode of sensory openness and drive towards improvisation, playfulness can be seen as central to a range of sexual activities from fumbling, random motions to elaborate, rehearsed scenarios. Play in the realm of sexuality involves experimentations with what bodies can feel and do. As pleasurable activity practised for its own sake, play involves the exploration of different bodily capacities, appetites, orientations and connections. Understood in this vein, play is not the opposite of seriousness or simply synonymous with fun. Driven by the quest for bodily pleasure, play may just as well be strained, dark and hurtful in the forms that it takes and the sensory intensities that it engenders. This article argues that the mode of playfulness and acts of play allow for pushing previously perceived and imagined horizons of embodied potentiality in terms of sexual routines and identifications alike. It examines the productive avenues that the notions of playfulness and play open up in conceptualising the urgency of sexual pleasures, the contingency of desires and their congealment in categories of identity.

Keywords

Desire, fantasy, play, playfulness, pleasure

This article explores the affordances of the conceptualisations of playfulness and play in feminist and queer studies of sex and sexuality. It makes a theoretical argument for understanding sex as playful activity and argues that the openness of possibilities elementary to the notions of playfulness and play can help in conceptualising the engrossing appeal of sex and the plasticity of sexual desires and orientations, as well as their congealment in categories of identity. *Playfulness* here translates as a mode, capacity and orientation of sensory openness, curiosity and

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zest for variation that precipitates improvisation in acts of play. *Play* again stands for the means and actualisations of playfulness: for doing playful things and carrying out playful scenarios under more or less clearly defined sets of rules and guidelines. While the notion of playfulness intermeshes with those of exploration, curiosity and experimentation, it also foregrounds pleasure and bodily intensity as key motivations for sexual activity. Sexual play, driven by the quest for pleasure and the intensification of the body, probes and stretches the horizons of what people may imagine themselves as doing, liking and preferring. By doing so, it pushes sexual identifications into motions of varying speeds and lengths.

The terms play and playfulness have emerged with some regularity in feminist and queer studies of sexuality, yet they have not been extensively mapped out or applied in theorising the affective capacities and shifting carnal horizons of possibility that sexual acts, desires and pleasures involve. To date, sexual play has been mainly examined in connection with childhood sexual explorations and adult role-playing in kink and queer communities, centrally in the context of BDSM (e.g. Barker and Langdridge, 2009; Beckmann, 2001; Nielsen et al., 2015; Wignall and McCormack, 2015). Scholars have also addressed sexual play in online exchanges and gaming environments (e.g. Brown, 2015; Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012; Waskul and Vannini, 2008) as well as the framing of casual sex as play in gay male online cultures (Race, 2015). Rather than examining playfulness and play as attributes characteristic of childhood sexuality, as properties of sexual subcultures where appetites divert from the normative routines of vanilla sex, or as characteristic of sexual exchanges on online platforms, I propose conceptualising them as dynamics central to sexuality more generally.

In feminist and queer theory, sexuality has been broadly mapped out as ‘a modality of existence, infusing all aspects of the ways we face and act in the world, part of our situation in the world’ (Grosz, 1994: 108; see also Berlant, 2012: 17). Meanwhile, studies of games and play have variously conceptualised play as an exciting frame of action that involves the modulation of experience (Nachamanovitch, 2009: 2; Sutton-Smith, 1997: 18), as ‘a mode of being human’ and a ‘force that pulls us together’ (Sicart, 2014: 1, 6). Play is routinely associated with immediate gratification, fun and spontaneity (Caillois, 2001: 6–7) while game studies scholar Miguel Sicart stresses the centrality of pleasure:

Play is not necessarily fun. It is pleasurable, but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing. Let’s not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, opening us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world. (2014: 3)

This suggestion resonates with conceptualisations of sexuality as both affective and cognitive, an issue of both sense and sensibility, in feminist theory. Following a broad typology put forward by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (1994: viii), it refers to ‘a drive, and impulse or form of propulsion’, ‘a series of practices and behaviors

involving bodies, organs, and pleasures', to identities as well as 'a set of orientations, positions, and desires, which implies that there are particular ways in which the desires, differences, and bodies of subjects can seek their pleasure'. No matter how elusive the pleasures that sexuality offers may turn out to be, their attraction explains much of the interest and attention that the topic of sex holds in both private and public lives. Like play, sex is pleasurable activity practised for pleasure's sake (Abramson and Pinkerton, 2002: 5; Frey, 1991; Waskul and Vannini, 2008: 242). There need not be any functional aim, goal or pursuit beyond the autotelic activity itself.

In what follows, I first examine conceptualisations of play as autotelic, pleasurable activity and apply them to studies of sexuality in order to see what productive interconnections and tensions might emerge. Sexual play can be instrumental to learning and identity work but one also learns, and one's capacity to act is transformed in the course of play. By framing sex in terms of playful exploration, it becomes possible to conceptualise how the boundaries of both regulatory norms and previously imagined bodily capacities can be reworked and possibly expanded. Moving from a discussion on sexual fantasy to the mutability of sexual identities, the second part of the article examines the role of playfulness and play in generating new forms and patterns of sensation through improvisation, and in disturbing the stability of sexual identities.

Play and sex

In his canonical discussion of play, Johan Huizinga (1949) defines it as elementary in and for human lives, voluntary in its participation, non-utilitarian in its orientation, important in the social connections it enables and absorbingly intense in the forms that it takes (also Caillois, 2001; Stenros, 2015: 57; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play offers 'rapture and enthusiasm': 'A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow' (Huizinga, 1949: 132). Huizinga (1949: 43) notes that many of these characteristics of play are also 'illustrative of the sexual act'. Nevertheless,

It would be erroneous to incorporate the sexual act itself, as love-play, in the play category. The biological process of pairing does not answer to the formal characteristics of play as we postulated them. Language also normally distinguishes between love-play and copulation. The term 'play' is specially or even exclusively reserved for erotic relationships falling outside the social norm. (1949: 43)

Bonnie Ruberg (2010) points out that for Huizinga, only reproductive heterosex serves a purpose while other sexual practices 'might even be classified as "perverse." This perversion, it seems, is inextricably bound up with playfulness.' The association of sex with heterosexual copulation is hardly surprising in a study originally published in 1938. Writing two decades later, Roger Caillois (2001: 27, 34) associated 'illicit', 'casual, abnormal, and strange sex practices' with play driven

by improvisation and joy, without exploring sexuality more broadly – or less normatively – understood as connected to similar drives. For his part, Sicart (2014: 21, 26) is quick to detach play from sex. For him, sex can be *playful* but not *play* since it involves other purposes and therefore conflicts with the autotelic character of play as an end in itself.

The tenuous conceptual distinction between the concepts of play and sex may speak of what Tuomas Harviainen, Ashley Brown and Jaakko Suominen (2016) identify as a general reluctance and awkwardness involved in addressing sexuality within game studies.¹ Even more crucially in terms of this article, such boundary maintenance frames sex as a clearly outlined set of activities and orientations geared towards the goals of orgasm and procreation. In other words, it assumes that sex has a definite and shared set of purposes. Yet orgasm is not necessarily the key aim or purpose of sexual play. All kinds of playful experimentations with the feel, touch and smell of bodies can be categorised as sexual without them being reducible to orgasm as a teleological goal. In fact the overwhelming majority of sexual encounters and practices fall outside any narrow definitions of purposefulness or usefulness. Measured in terms of productivity and outcome, sex, like play for Caillois (2001: 5), basically involves a waste of both time and energy. Given the massive concern with avoiding procreation (rather than advancing it), reproductive purposes for coitus represent an exception rather than the rule. Nor is reproduction exactly a pressing concern in any variations of oral and anal sex, licking, sucking, fingering and probing, irrespective of the partners' genders. Noting this, sexologists Paul Abramson and Steven Pinkerton (2002: 6) remark that, 'Even penile–vaginal intercourse is practised far more often than necessary to ensure the continuation of the species'. This is undoubtedly correct, yet also something of a stark understatement.

In his account of sexual behaviour as adult play, psychologist Kurt Frey (1991: 56) argues that it can only be defined phenomenologically, in terms of the experiences of play activity itself. For Frey (1991: 56–57), sex involves a paratelic state characteristic of play: 'emphasis on immediate gratification, focus on heightened emotionality and sensuality, effort to become "worked up" and emotionally charged, and activity which is freely chosen, spontaneous, and experimental'. Without a paratelic state of mind sex can, for Frey, feel more like work: if one is not in the mood, sexual activity is drained of enchantment (also Caillois, 2001: 6). There is much value in Frey's conceptualisation, not least since it remains rare as an extended discussion of sex as play that aims to address the appeal of sexuality in terms of pleasure. While sex can certainly be fun, ludic and ludicrous (Waskul and Vannini, 2008), framing sex as play need not however involve its reduction to recreational free exploration. Play – sexual or other – is not fully free and voluntary, egalitarian and exclusively connected to the positive range of affect. Like human actions in general, it can be asymmetrical, risky, hurtful, violent and damaging in its reverberations and the pleasures it offers (Sicart, 2014: 2; Stenros, 2015: 72–76). As a mode of action, play takes surprising routes that are not either 'good' or 'bad' by definition. And, as the recent work on the so-called dark side of play in

game studies (e.g. Brown, 2015; Mortensen et al., 2015) illustrates, play can well involve disrespect and disregard towards established rules, such as the comfort zones of one's partner.

Examples of sexual play gone awry are certainly abundant, from acts leading to physical injury to hard boundaries being ignored, intimate arrangements turned oppressive, acts enforced, partners not wanting to play along or playing with different sets of rules. One may knowingly set out to play, even without much desire to do so. People play along with scenarios set and desired by others, rehearse and test out their rules until they seem to somehow fit. People can feel compelled towards their acts of play and can be literally forced to act them out. Not everyone plays nice and not everyone plays at all. Despite pre-established agreements between partners, the forms and possibilities of sexual acts are never fully set or knowable from the outset, not fully theirs to foresee or control. Sexual play therefore does not equal a game resulting in winners and losers: its rules may be notably lax or even ephemeral (Brown, 2015: 13; Stenros, 2015: 70, 94). While knowing decisions are elementary in setting up scenes of play, there is rawness, immediacy and fickleness to sexual fantasy, desire and the ways in which acts of play unfold.

Sexual desire can be highly inconvenient, 'overwhelm thought, shatter intention, violate principles, and perturb identity' (Berlant, 2012: 26). It does not 'restrict itself to the most suitable person, in the most suitable place' and can forsake us 'when we do find that person, whatever the presence or absence of technical virtuosity on offer' (Segal, 1994: 104). The nervous urgency of desire can push people from their zones of safety towards the risk of relationships severed, professional reputations compromised and personal health damaged. Meanwhile, the weight of sexual and gender norms, memories and traumas shape one's ways of being in the world, sometimes to the degree of undermining the liveability of individual lives (Hammers, 2014). Such densities of experience are far detached from any notions of playful lightness. Rather than being antithetical to the gravity of identities lived and practised, acts of playing sex, playful sexuality and sexual play can be considered as a means of acting them out and opening them up to variation and change.

Pleasure and instrumentality

The terminology of play is abundantly used in connection with sexuality outside academic contexts. Sexual therapists, advice columnists and self-help authors routinely suggest variations of play – such as the introduction of sex toys and sessions of role-play – for spicing up long-term relationships where habitual motions have solidified and dulled any dizzying sense of lust and opportunity. In such instances, sexual play becomes a form of working at relationships while playfulness grows inseparable from constant reskilling, the guidelines of which tend to follow the contours of normative gendered scripts (Harvey and Gill, 2011: 56; see also Attwood, 2011). Such guidelines aim to teach people how to play, with the implicit premise that people are not prone to, or skilled in sexual play to start with. Furthermore, they frame sexual play as instrumental in improving relationships.

Sexual play takes place, and derives a large part of its dynamics from social organisation, identity categories, normative operations, power relations, gendered images or tropes. Sex has been extensively examined as a matter of acquired cultural norms, templates, scripts and rules that provide gendered guidelines of action while also separating the acceptable from the unacceptable, the so-called normal from the deviant, vanilla from kink and the private from the public (e.g. Hoppe, 2011; Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Vörös, 2015). As Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2007: 109) note, sexual scripts need not be understood as locking people into predictable roles but as ‘something much more fluid and open, offering opportunities to improvise. Scripts are played with, not simply played out; they are open to renegotiation as we take cues from partners and make sense of what is happening to them, to us and between us.’ As ‘active compositions’ (Jackson and Scott, 2007: 111), sexual scripts are under constant renegotiation and open to play. At the same time, their felt presence in people’s orientations, feelings and motions towards one another can be forceful.

As briefly mentioned earlier, in studies of sexuality, the notion and practice of play has been most extensively examined in connection with childhood explorations in sexual play on the one hand, and adult play specific to sexual subcultures, on the other. In the former, play has been conceptualised as an exploration of embodiment and sexuality, as well as the social roles and routines connected to them. Understood as a form of learning fuelled by curiosity, childhood sexual play has been framed as a negotiation of expectations and orientations concerning gender and sexuality (Kontula, 2009: 81; Lamb, 2001). Through sexual play, children learn not only about what their bodies can do but also what they are and are not supposed to do.

Children can persuade, manipulate and coerce each other to sexual play, but they may also enter it freely (Lamb and Coakley, 1993). Adolescents describe their motivations for sexual play as connected to learning but even more centrally to curiosity, fun and the quest for pleasure – that is, as pleasurable activity practised for its own sake. Sexual play can facilitate escape from boredom, be a form of social bonding and flirtation, or take the shape of a riskier testing out of bodily possibilities (Nielsen et al., 2015). Incorporating and working through both personal likes and social norms, sexual play – whether it is practised by adolescents or adults – does not necessarily emulate normative gender routines or sexual choreographies. The forms of play can be serious or anything but, follow cultural scripts or elaborately break against them.

Research on adult sexual play, from bondage and domination sessions to age-play and pony play, has examined it in terms of the pursuit of pleasure but equally as ‘the discovery of new intensities, the diverse dimensions and potentials of “lived bodies,” as well as the development of contextual ethics’ (Beckmann, 2001; see also Lewis, 2011). Writing on SM, Michel Foucault (1997: 152, 165–166) addresses it as the exploration of new possibilities for pleasure and the intensification of sexual encounters that builds on a combination of rules and openness. Contra the relations and operations of social power where the mobility between different roles and

positions is constrained, the relations of SM are fluid and strategic:

even when the roles are stabilized you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries ... It is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure. (Foucault, 1997: 169)

From the perspective of SM practitioners, a separation of sex and play would be meaningless, or even absurd. Sexual play involves improvisation within the bounds of pre-established agreements between partners, articulated guidelines, soft and hard boundaries and possible safe words (e.g. Lewis, 2011: 5–6; see also Hammers, 2014). Some forms of sexual play occur within a ‘magic circle’ such as a dungeon detached from the spaces and routines of everyday life (Huizinga, 1949: 11–12, 20). Margot Weiss (2011: 6) nevertheless argues that, rather than existing ‘in a bracketed space of play’, SM performances are deeply embedded in capitalist cultural formations, social histories of privilege and oppression, as well as the complex, interlacing categories of identity. To state the obvious, sexual play is not a realm of freedom external to culture, society, economy or politics. The pleasures involved in testing out, or stepping in and out of different positions in role-play can be intense precisely because the scripts and norms they entail are so viscerally lived and felt (see Brown, 2015: 5–6; Harviainen, 2011; Weiss, 2011: 17–19; also Harrison and Holm, 2013). It is therefore more apt to see sexual play as integrated in, drawing on and cutting through the fabric of everyday life and its temporalities, and as providing it with a specific affective intensity and flavour.

BDSM play has been analysed as somatic intervention, bodily reconnection and affective reworking of hurtful or traumatic experiences (see Barker et al., 2007; Hammers, 2014; Weiss, 2011). Weiss (2006: 240) points out that the pleasure of BDSM ‘lies in its depth, in the creation and subsequent transgression of boundaries around what one is and can be, what is safe and what is dangerous and what is set aside and what is reconnected’. Such play is serious in that it derives some of its intensity from the incorporation of personal life experiences, attitudes and social power dynamics into sexual scenes (Weiss, 2006: 236–240). As a form of trauma play, BDSM is a way to increase, or restore, the liveliness and liveability of bodies the affective capacities of which have been violently truncated or cut (Hammers, 2014). Associations between trauma and BDSM have nevertheless also been resisted for framing sexual play as a functional solution to a problem – and hence for articulating sexual tastes as something ‘curable’ – in ways that downplay the centrality of sheer bodily pleasure as its key motivation (Barker and Langdridge, 2009).

Grosz (1995a: 247) argues that, ‘Sexuality, desire, cannot be seen in terms of a function, purpose or goal, for this is to reduce it to functionality.’ This, of course, does not mean that sex cannot routinely be reduced to functionality, or that sexual

play could not serve functional purposes. Acts of play recommended by sex therapists can improve relationships; children learn all kinds of things through sexual play, and sexual role-play serves multiple therapeutic purposes of recovery and self-discovery. It nevertheless remains crucial not to reduce the importance of play to such functions or to perceive sexual play as an instrumental means to an end. As autotelic activity, sexual play is practised for its own sake. Understood in this vein, sex involves no use value and serves no specific purposes beyond the quest for pleasure through bodily intensity that has the power to transform those experiencing it. Pleasure is the key purpose of both sex and play: there need not be other telos than the enchantment of the activity itself.

As sexual desire moves toward and becomes attached to different scenes and objects, its forms are reorganised, and so is one's sense of self (Berlant, 2012: 65). Sex can be hurtful and traumatising, a source of shame as well as joy, serious and therapeutic, tantalising and absorbing, boring and dire – as can play. Thinking about sexuality in terms of playfulness and play does not foreclose analyses of such complexities and contradictions. In contrast, it affords the analytical openness necessary for examining the force and contingency of sexual desire as that which both binds identities and sets them in motion. As I argue in more detail later, a focus on playfulness allows for a conceptualisation of sexual identity in constant, more or less subtle transformation. Playfulness, as an attitude of openness, and play, as practices of exploration and improvisation, can be seen as elementary to the transformations in sexual desires, fantasies, pleasures and orientations within, in-between and even despite the categories of identity.

Sexual fantasies and identities felt and lived

Sexual play – be it elaborate fetish role-play, a BDSM session, self-exploration with sex toys, a teasing game of tickles played with an intimate partner, or a flirtatious exchange of nude pictures with a virtual stranger – is imaginative and improvisatory activity connected to fantasy. Yet they are not literally about 'acting out' sexual fantasies. Fantasies can themselves be understood as forms of thought play geared towards intensity of experience. Both memories and fantasies of bodily encounters, motions and sensations contribute to and layer into somatic archives that feed into acts of sexual play. Acts of play then feed back into both memories and sexual fantasies.

Martin Barker (2014: 146) maps sexual fantasies as 'the means through which adults try out versions of self-in-sexual-society, reimagining themselves through others' reimaginings'. In addition to being 'a conscious accentuation of desire', sexual fantasy can open up new possibilities and help imagine 'what I might or might not be' (Barker, 2014: 155). Understood in this vein, fantasies contribute to the creation of novel connections, the imagining of possible play scenarios and the intensification of sexual desire. Such unpacking of what sexual fantasies may do, what trajectories they may take and what people may do with them foregrounds contingency, experimentation and imagination as core features of sexual lives.

It also points to the ultimate futility of juxtaposing fantasy with reality. And just as it is important not to contrast sexual fantasies with the notion of the real, it remains crucial not to position play as the opposite of either work or seriousness, or to frame the contingency of sexual tastes as something that forecloses attachments to sexual and gender identities and their felt gravity. Bodies carry ‘tendencies reviving the past and already striving towards a future’ (Massumi, 2015: 54). Fantasies can be both prospective and retrospective in their temporal orientation and move back and forth between that which has been, what could have been, what can be and what currently is. Looking both forward and back, inwards and out, fantasies provide affective fuel for sexual desire as that which orients people in their acts of play and relationships to others.

Experiences of bodies and selves are variable, sometimes to the point of disturbing. The feel of a serendipitous touch – careless, hesitant, caressing, firm or anxious – may shoot violent shivers through the body that continue to resonate as embodied memories for years to come, even as the immediacy of sensation remains impossible to recapture. Sensations that one may desperately wish to forget linger on in somatic archives, generating unpredictable patterns of interference (Paasonen, 2011: 202–205). Such layered memories give bodies a sense of depth as they accumulate ‘in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency’ (Massumi, 2015: 4). Sexual play both reverberates with such somatic archives and contributes to them by expanding their shapes and boundaries.

A range of non-genital sexual play has been conceptualised as an eroticisation and affective intensification of the whole body (e.g. Foucault, 1997: 165), yet the bodily capacities of giving and receiving intensity can be applied to conceptualisations of sexual pleasure much more generally. For Grosz, the intensification of bodily zones often occurs through the unexpected, ‘through a kind of wild and experimental free play that re-marks, reinscribes orifices, glands, sinews, muscles differently’ (Grosz, 1995a: 289). In the course of sexual play, heightened affective intensity may emerge unpredictably or result from bodily training or techniques acquired through a sustained repetition of movements (cf. Spatz, 2015; Weiss, 2011: 6, 10–11). Jane Bennett (2001: 4, 5) similarly suggests that enchantment, as enthralling, disturbing and pleasurable experiences of aliveness (for her not an issue of sexuality as such), emerges from surprising encounters but can also be fostered through deliberate strategies, such as giving ‘greater expression to the sense of play’. Sexual pleasures occur, and can be learnt, through moments of affective resonance that move us in unexpected ways and transform us in the process.

Understood in this vein, play and playfulness are connected to the very contingency of intimate pleasures and discomforts, libidinal pushes and pulls. And, as Lauren Berlant suggests, play ‘can provide a space of interest within which other rhythms and therefore forms of encounter with and within sexuality can be forged’ (in Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 6). By opening up one’s sense of the bodily horizons of possibility, play, as pleasure-seeking activity, pushes the boundaries of previously defined sexual identifications. This is also a point made by Clarissa Smith (2009: 23) who detaches the transformative potentials of the lived body

from any specific sexual identity. Rather, Smith sees such potential as matters of embodied capacity and affective intensity that can resonate across categories of identity. Such a focus on changing sexual palates and fickle desires sets in motion, and rubs against, the logic of categorisation central to the politics of identity (see also Kulick, 2000: 271; Probyn, 2000: 75).

If, for Huizinga (1949: 43), ‘The term “play” is specially – or even exclusively – reserved for erotic relationships falling outside the social norm’, it might seem that the vast and wondrous landscape of non-reproductive sexual play is their prime location for theorising the visceral appeal of sexuality. I nevertheless argue that a more productive path involves displacing, or at least reconsidering the very notion of the norm as the affective hub around which theorisations of sexuality revolve. According to a by now familiar line of critique of queer theory, it is reactive in mapping out norms – such as heteronormativity and normative categories of identity – in order to challenge, circumvent and subvert them (e.g. Grosz, 1995b: 224). Norms may then become articulated as more coherent and solid than they otherwise appear. Mapping out queer in relation to a solidified norm of the straight renders visible social relations of power and hierarchies that weigh and matter. Yet juxtapositions of queer and straight may also performatively produce, or even postulate, differences of kind between sexual practices and appetites thus categorised. If the queer becomes the figure of transgression, play and exploration, then the straight remains its opposite as contained, non-playful and non-curious (Beasley et al., 2015: 681). Such figures of fantasy push against queer theory’s project of destabilising the notion of the normal at the heart of the mechanisms of social power that engenders the binary hierarchical divides of heterosexuality and homosexuality, straightness and its others (e.g. Eng et al., 2005; Love, 2011; Warner, 2000). For me, this project involves queering sexuality – straight sex included – by detaching it from notions of stability and normalcy and by conceptualising it as spectrums of experimental play geared towards pleasure.

Addressing the centrality of antinormativity in queer theory Vicky Kirby (2015: 97) asks, ‘why the center, the norm, the rule, is routinely accepted as a fixed reference point *against which* deviation, change, and singularity – the exception – must be measured’. Kirby points out that a society is not identified through its internal coherence, nor is an individual identifiable in terms of her internal unity or consistency. She argues that ‘a norm is similarly erratic: if it is accurate to describe a norm as a constant, then what persists is something inherently mutable’ (Kirby, 2015: 99). Following this line of reasoning, contingency is all that ultimately remains, whether one is discussing sexual norms, categories of identity, shapes of fantasy or experiences of lust, no matter how firm the hold of social norms and categories may feel.

As people go about their lives, fantasise, experiment with their bodies and those of others, sexual desires continue to carve out novel connections and disconnections, sensory experiences layer, appetites vary and bodily boundaries of comfort become tenuously redrawn (Berlant, 2012: 6; Grosz, 1994: 165; Paasonen, 2011: 202; Probyn, 2000: 70, 147). Sexual desire resists its congealment in and through

identity categories for the very reason that it is not constant, predictable or knowable as such. At the same time, identity categories are crucial to how sexual desires circulate, how they stick and how people make sense of them, the world and their orientations within it. Individual sexual tastes, preferences and orientations evolve and vary over people's lifespans. What one desires at 20 is – most likely, or with any luck – a different configuration from that which the same person prefers, or craves, at the age of 50, in terms of sexual acts, the partners' bodily aesthetics, relationship arrangements, emotional proximities and distances. While sexual tastes and preferences change, oscillate and vary, analysis, or politics, operating within clearly separable categories of identity effaces such contingency from view.

The visceral appeal of sex

The disruptive intensities of sexual pleasure cannot necessarily be fully translated into, or articulated through language. It remains nevertheless crucial to conceptualise them, to somehow grope at their edges in order to retain at least a little of their juiciness, if studies of sexuality are to account for what makes the topic at hand so deeply compelling. Spaces of openness and opportunity that unfold in relation to and through an array of norms, scripts and rules are pivotal to the titillating, even engulfing force that sex and sexuality hold in individual fantasies, cultural representations and social arrangements. Theorisations of this force need to remain open to its unsettling qualities and volatile trajectories that resist capture in social categories (no matter how intersectional). Conceptualisations of playfulness and play in studies of sexuality and sex can help in achieving some of this.

The oscillating affective registers of interest and joy, disgust and shame rooted in both personal histories and social norms are complexly entangled in sexual lives and acts of play. These acts, or scenes, are propelled by the restlessness of desire, supported by fantasy and playful mood, and geared towards bodily discovery, novelty and variations of pleasure. Studying sex 'as play rather than as a drama' (Berlant, 2008) makes it possible to highlight improvisation driven by curiosity, desire for variation and openness towards surprise as things that matter greatly in sexuality and the scholarly attention to it. Considerations of playfulness and play help to foreground the role of enjoyment which, despite its urgency in and for sexual lives, studies of sexuality often give too little attention. Immersive and possibly disturbing, the intensities of sexual pleasure are kin to Bennett's (2001: 4) definition of enchantment as experiences of being 'struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday'. 'To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away – enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects' (Bennett, 2001: 5). Much remains to be explored in such tortuous, enchanting dynamics and manifold practices of sexual pleasure.

Understood as simultaneously serious and ludic, both bound to rules and resistant to them, routine-like and extraordinary, sex involves a degree of uncertainty, an openness of becoming. As exploration based on agreements between the partners

involved, sexual play helps to set in motion the felt boundaries of bodily capacity. In experimentations of what and how bodies feel and do, it allows for bodies to become re-attuned in relation to one other and the events that bring them together, and to move beyond the boundaries by which their orientations, desires and palates may previously have been confined (cf. Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 117; Massumi, 2015: 59).

Sexual play takes meandering, even erratic routes but also follows carefully scripted choreographies resembling the ritual. Conceptualised as improvisatory openness towards variation and possibility, playfulness can be seen as a contingent dynamic of sexual orientations and identifications. Combined, the notions of play and playfulness make it possible to think through the mutability of sexual lives and to trace the circuits of sexual pleasure and desire in their splendid and miserable intensities, the unexpected attachments and persistent aches that they engender.

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Note

1. A separation of play and sex is hardly unique to game studies – consider, for example, Donald Winnicott’s conceptualisation of sexuality as that which disrupts play or, in Adam Phillips’ (2005: 154) terms, play as abeyance of sex. While much could be said of Winnicott’s theory of play, as outlined in *Playing & Reality*, this remains outside the scope of this article, as does any sustained discussion of psychoanalytical theories of fantasy and desire.

Within game studies, sexuality and play have been mainly discussed in the context of games featuring sexual content (in terms of representations, tasks, goals and plotlines connected to, or making use of sexuality), in terms of in-game sexual dynamics, variations of sexual play and play with sexuality in game environments, as well as the economies of desire, forms of intimacy, bodily intensity and unruly gender performativity that all these afford. (See Brown, 2015; Osborne, 2012; Ruberg, 2010; Sundén, 2009; Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012; Wysocki and Lauretia, 2015; for an extensive and systematic discussion of game studies literature on sexuality, see Harviainen et al., 2016.)

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