

IV. The Utopia of Rules

One reason I have seen fit to spend so much time on fantasy worlds is because the topic opens up some fundamental questions about the nature of play, games, and freedom—all of which, I believe, lie at the core of bureaucracy's covert appeal. On the one hand, a bureaucracy is anything but playful. Mechanistic and impersonal, it would appear to represent the negation of any possibility of playfulness. On the other hand, being trapped in a bureaucratic runaround feels very much like being caught inside some kind of horrific game.

Bureaucracies create games—they're just games that are in no sense fun. But it might be useful here to think more carefully about what games really are, and what it is that makes them fun in the first place. First of all, what is the relationship between play and games? We play games. So does that mean play and games are really the same thing? It's certainly true that the English language is somewhat unusual for even making the distinction between the two—in most languages, the same word covers both. (This is true even of most European languages, as with the French *jeu* or German *spiele*.) But on another level they seem to be opposites, as one suggests free-form creativity; the other, rules.

The great Dutch sociologist Johann Huizinga wrote a book called *Homo Ludens* that is ostensibly a theory of play. In fact, the book makes for a very bad theory of play, but it's not at all a bad theory of games.¹⁵⁶ According to Huizinga, games have certain common features. First, they are clearly bounded in time and space, and thereby framed off from ordinary life. There is a field, a board, a starting pistol, a finish line. Within that time/space, certain people are designated as players. There are also rules, which define precisely what those players can and cannot do. Finally, there is always some clear idea of the stakes, of what the players have to do to win the game. And, critically:

that's all there is. Any place, person, action, that falls outside that framework is extraneous; it doesn't matter; it's not part of the game. Another way to put this would be to say that games are pure rule-governed action.

It seems to me this is important, because this precisely why games are fun. In almost any other aspect of human existence, all these things are ambiguous. Think of a family quarrel, or a workplace rivalry. Who is or is not a party to it, what's fair, when it began and when it's over, what it even means to say you won—it's all extremely difficult to say. The hardest thing of all is to understand the rules. In almost any situation we find ourselves in, there *are* rules—even in casual conversation, there are tacit rules of who can speak in what order, pacing, tone, deference, appropriate and inappropriate topics, when you can smile, what sort of humor is allowable, what you should be doing with your eyes, and a million other things besides. These rules are rarely explicit, and usually there are many conflicting ones that could, possibly, be brought to bear at any given moment. So we are always doing the difficult work of negotiating between them, and trying to predict how others will do the same. Games allow us our only real experience of a situation where all this ambiguity is swept away. Everyone knows exactly what the rules are. And not only that, people actually *do* follow them. And by following them, it is even possible to win! This—along with the fact that unlike in real life, one has submitted oneself to the rules completely voluntarily—is the source of the pleasure.

Games, then, are a kind of utopia of rules.

This is also how we can understand the real difference between games and play. True, one can play a game; but to speak of “play” does not necessarily imply the existence of rules at all.¹⁵⁷ Play can be purely improvisational. One could simply be playing around. In this sense, play in its pure form, as distinct from games, implies a pure expression of creative energy. In fact,

if it were possible to come up with a workable definition of “play” (this is notoriously difficult) it would have to be something along these lines: play can be said to be present when the free expression of creative energies becomes an end in itself. It is freedom for its own sake. But this also makes play in a certain sense a higher-level concept than games: play can create games, it can generate rules—in fact, it inevitably does produce at least tacit ones, since sheer random playing around soon becomes boring—but therefore by definition play cannot itself be intrinsically rule-bound. This is all the more true when play becomes social. Studies of children’s play, for example, inevitably discover that children playing imaginary games spend at least as much time arguing about the rules than they do actually playing them. Such arguments become a form of play in themselves.¹⁵⁸

On one level, all this is obvious: we are just talking about the emergence of form. Freedom has to be in tension with something, or it’s just randomness. This suggests that the absolute pure form of play, one that really is absolutely untrammelled by rules of any sort (other than those it itself generates and can set aside at any instance) itself can exist only in our imagination, as an aspect of those divine powers that generate the cosmos.

Here’s a quote from Indian philosopher of science Shiv Visvanathan:

A game is a bounded, specific way of problem solving. Play is more cosmic and open-ended. Gods play, but man unfortunately is a gaming individual. A game has a predictable resolution, play may not. Play allows for emergence, novelty, surprise.¹⁵⁹

All true. But there is also something potentially terrifying about play for just this reason. Because this open-ended creativity is also what allows it to be randomly destructive. Cats play with mice. Pulling the wings off flies is also a form of play.

Playful gods are rarely ones any sane person would desire to encounter.

Let me put forth a suggestion, then.

What ultimately lies behind the appeal of bureaucracy is fear of play.

For the social theorist, there is one obvious analogy to play as a principle that generates rules, but is not itself bound by them. This is the principle of sovereignty. The reader will remember sovereignty was one of the three principles—along with administration and politics—that ultimately came together in our current notion of “the state.” The term “sovereignty” is mostly used in political theory nowadays as a synonym for “independence” or “autonomy”—the right of a government to do what it likes within its own borders—but it originally emerged from very specific European debates about the power of kings. Basically, the question was: is it possible to say that the supreme ruler of a kingdom is in any sense bound by its laws?

Those who argued that sovereigns were not bound by those laws drew an analogy with divine power. God is the creator, and ultimate enforcer, of any system of cosmic morality. But in order to create a system, one must be prior to it; for this reason God himself cannot be bound by moral laws. This is not at all an unusual conclusion. In Madagascar, proverbial wisdom was quite explicit about this: God was represented as both the ultimate judge—watching from on high and punishing transgressions—and simultaneously, as a completely arbitrary figure tossing lightning bolts and blasting mortals for no reason whatsoever. Occasional African kings tried to make themselves human embodiments of this absolute principle: the most famous example was the Kabaka of the Ganda kingdom. When he met with English visitors who tried to impress him by presenting him with some new efficient English rifle, he would, in turn,