

# Play Theory: The Victorian Gospel of Play

- Play is a noun that denotes various types of material play:  
children's play----simple games: parlor games/ board games----sports
- Play is characterized by flexible rules, imagination, spontaneity, freedom, fun, motion, and energy: play is an end in itself.
  - Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955), Roger Cailliois, "The Structure and Classification of Games" (1955), Special Edition of *Yale French Studies* (1968) on play and games
  - Dickens, Preface to Cheap Edition of *The Pickwick Papers* (1848)
  - Robert Louis Stevenson, "Child's Play" (1892)
- Games have the characteristics of play (raw material of games) but have firm, specific rules, promote competition, and have a specific purpose—to win. Games are often a means to an end, particularly complex, competitive games—sports. Games can be an effective way to teach and instruct.
  - Christian Messenger, *Sport and the Spirit of Play in Contemporary American Fiction* (1990)
  - Nancy Morrow, *Dreadful Games: The Play of Desire in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1988)
  - Kathleen Blake, *Play, Games, and Sport: The Literary Works of Lewis Carroll* (1974)
- "In an increasingly complex world, the Victorians felt the need to create an existence that was manageable, self-contained, and regulated." Ira Bruce Nadel, "The Mansion of Bliss," or the Place of Play in Victorian Life and Literature, (1982), p. 20
- The paradox of games is that their structure and purpose limit (not eliminate) play.
- Games are an artificial construction designed to promote competition, ensure fairness, and reward merit-based performance: How life should or could be. Therefore, when life *is* a game, this creates the illusion that life can be ordered and meaningful, an attempt to negate the ambiguity and chaos of society and the unpredictability of human thought and actions.
- There is an outside to play and games, a boundary signaling that they are like daily life but are not daily life itself. Players exist in two simultaneous roles: the play self and real self, and this dual perspective affords moral and ethical perspective. However, when players do not acknowledge or comprehend an outside to play and games—life itself is play or a game—this leads to disorientation and possibly destructive behavior—e.g., life becomes a zero-sum game.