# The Limits of Game Playing

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone & Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

# Introduction

By viewing J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as belonging more to the tradition of the British novel rather than the young adult fantasy novel, we see the similarities in these novels (and the series) with the nineteenth-century novel, particularly in the "focus on a protagonist whose effort to define his or her place in society is the main concern of the plot" and in the way it "constructs a tension between surrounding social conditions and the aspiration of the hero or heroine" . . . (Robson and Christ, *NA: The Victorian Age*, Vol E, 2012, p. 1036). The connections between Rowling and Charles Dickens, synonymous with the nineteenth-century novel, are quite remarkable.  Consider, for example, characterization (e.g., names, character tics), themes (e.g., children/childhood, parenting, food/hunger, gender, social class, education), and composition (e.g., plotting and writing style).  In particular, we should note that game playing, a central activity in the novels, is not simply a metaphor but denotes material, cultural activities—a world "at play" (Kaiser, *The Victorian World in Play*, 2012, p. 1, 44), )—that determine how individuals understand their relationship to society as well as their selfhood.

# Introduction

Both *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* reveal that games (more broadly a type of play) are a microcosm of life. As artificial constructions, games, whether Quidditch in *HPSS and HPGF or the tasks in the Triwizard Tournament in HPGF*, are designed to promote competition, equal opportunity, fairness, and merit-based reward—how life should be or might be. In both novels, however, a conflict occurs when particular characters believe life *is* a game (with no outside) in which winning at any cost is all that matters. While Harry Potter understands the severe consequences of such a view, Professor Quirrell accepts this view of a world "*in* play" (Kaiser, *The Victorian World in Play*, 2012, p. 1, 44), asserting what Lord Voldemort, in his contest against society, taught him: "There is no good or evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it . . . (HPSS 291). And in HPGF, Lord Voldemort, challenging Harry to a wizard's duel, uses the structure of a contest to prove who is the most powerful wizard. Moreover, in HPGF, cheating during the Triwizard Tournament threatens the purpose and structure of games (more broadly play), merging them with daily life. It is Harry's ability to see outside of the boundaries games that gives him moral and ethical perspective. In HPSS and HPGF, games and play can be humanizing and a means of gaining self-understanding and social perspective. But both novels more ominously highlight our belief in the illusion of game playing, a reflection of our desire for structure, order, and meaning in a world that is chaotic, ambiguous, and sometimes unjust.

# Play Theory

- Play is a noun that denotes various types of material play:
children's play and 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 but have firm, specific rules, promote competition, and have a specific purpose—to win.  Games can be a means to an end, particularly complex, competitive games—sports.
  - 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

- "Traditionally, sport activities in school and school stories not only were regarded as a means of directing aggression and energy that students might feel toward each other into something less unsettling or dangerous, but also were intended to teach such team values as loyalty, courage, leadership and the ability to be a good loser."  Annie Hiebert Alton, "Generic Fusion and the Mosaic of HP,"  2003, p. 153.  Sports (or games) are a microcosm of life.

- 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.  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.

# *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

- Quidditch: First Match (Ch 11—beat Slytherin, 185-6; 187-8, 191); Second Match (Ch 13—beat Hufflepuff, 223-25); [Ch 17—lose to Ravenclaw (Harry misses this match]
  - Early references to Quidditch: part of Hogwarts culture (pp. 77, 79, 107-08)
  - Competition (or *coopetition)*, fixed rules, (referees: Madame Hooch/Snape), clear purpose—winning, strategy (catching the golden snitch). Harry is a seeker: above the action, more flexibility, spontaneity, and creativity (pp. 186, 187). His heroic destiny
  - "Harry's [victories] on the Quidditch pitch [have] to be linked closely to his sense of honour: his own, that of his House and, through that, his School" (Christine Berberich, HP and the Idea of the Gentleman Hero," 2011, p. 149)
  - For Harry sports provide identity/relief (p. 225); (Ron, p. 211)/Physical sport
    - Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857)

- Life at Hogwarts—Inter-House competition.
  - Competition structures life at Hogwarts
  - Challenges to get the stone: Winged keys (use brooms—Quidditch, p. 279-81), wizard's chess (p. 283), potion riddle (pp. 285-86)

- Rules: Snape (p. 223), Hermione (p. 181), Dean and Hagrid (p. 188)
  - Even in games, rules can be bent or broken

- Contest against Voldemort: Life is a contest (a game) for power, about winning
  - Quirrell/Voldemort (p. 291)/Harry's fight against them
    - Dumbledore (p. 298)
    - *Chamber of Secrets*: Weasley's—not life and death (p. 170)

# *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

- Quidditch: World Cup
  - International *coopetition*
  Quality of play: speed, moves, artfulness—V Krum, 106-114
  Fans' passion: sport creates common identity
  - Violence and "dirty" play—but not illegal: bending the rules

- Triwizard Tournament
  - Three tasks—move to greater isolation for Harry: individual challenge in competition—life itself
  - Movement towards less fan participation?
  - First task--Quidditch
  - Cheating has always been part of the tournament—collapses boundaries between games and daily life (Ch 20)
  - Harry's concern for others—Second task: his "moral fiber" (507). Perspective from outside of the game's boundaries—not life itself. Reaction of Ron: winning is everything.
  - Third task:  Coopetition—Cedric

- Yule Ball—dating as a competition

- Contest against Voldemort: Life is a contest (a game) for power, about winning
  - Challenges Harry to a duel, a contest to *prove* who is the most powerful wizard. (Chpts 33-34)

## Hogwarts/ Society

## Quidditch

**Sport (Games) As an Artificial Construction**
\*\*Purpose—win match
\*\*Structure—specific rules, scoring, control & limit play, drives competition. One (team) winner, measurable outcome, merit-based, fairness, equal opportunity, tension & challenges
\*\*Defined positions: Chaser, Keeper, Beater, Seeker— score points
\*\*Merge boundaries with daily life but still an outside of the game--perspective

**Life is Not a Game**
\*\*Competition—Voldemort's desire for power (no good and evil). No outside of the game—collapses boundaries between play and daily life. Losing = death. Challenges Harry to a duel in GF to *prove* who is the most powerful wizard
\*\*Cheating collapses boundaries between games and the daily life-- (Triwizard Tournament).
\*\*Bend or break rules, invent them during play.
\*\* As an artificial construction, games cannot account for ambiguity and uncertainty of life, human feelings and behavior
\*\*Dumbledore—Compete not to win but to keep Voldemort weak (accept losing)/GF: work together
\*\*Dumbledore: our choices more than our abilities
\*\*Harry sees outside the boundaries of games, the illusion of game playing—his "moral fiber."

**Sport As a Microcosm of Life**
\*\*Competition structures life at Hogwarts: Quidditch/World Cup/Triwizard Tournament
\*\*Ministry of Magic— administration/Dept of Magical Games & Sports
\*\*Skill, courage, fun, teamwork, loyalty, friendship, *coopetition*, fun, creativity, following rules but also bending or breaking rules
\*\*Harry—fair play, moral and ethical values, loyalty, physical skill, decision-making.
\*\*Harry is a seeker—quest for self-discovery and his place in the world, heroic destiny, freedom and perspective above the pitch

# Conclusion: The Worlds of Dickens and Rowling

J. K. Rowling trusts Harry Potter's ability to make his way in the world, with the help of friends; it is human relationships, not magic, that assist Harry on the path to discovering his selfhood and place in the world. For Harry, the risks of game playing are an important part of discovering his sense of self as well as the limits of competition—which must be grounded in moral and ethical values, in the choices individuals make. We see in the moment of play "the willful belief in acting out one's own capacity for the future" (Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 198), but the belief in illusion of game playing challenges the individual's perspective of self and society.