

Play happens and is studied in many contexts thanks to its wide-ranging diversity both in time and space. Sutton-Smith addresses this ambiguity by suggesting that we discuss play in terms of why we do it -- be it from the theorist's or player's point-of-view -- rather than trying to formulate strict definitions.

Sutton-Smith uses forty-eight various forms and phrases of “play” in his essay. The proliferation of this word emphasizes the ambiguity inherent to modern interpretations of play. As explanation, he offers seven rhetorics, differing views of play’s value in society, and examines the interplay of play and rhetoric with each other.

"Play": diverse experiences, scholarly perspectives.

Rhetorics: persuasive approaches to discussing play's purpose, cultural context.

Ancient

Fate: cf. "alea"

Power: Symbolic conflict.

Identity: Solidifies community.

Frivolous: Tricksters, fools.

Modern

Progress: Animals, children. Development, not enjoyment.

Imaginary: Creativity, improvisation.

Self: Intrinsically satisfying escapism.

Each corresponds to specific advocates, games, players, theories.

Brian Sutton-Smith attempts to show the reader how different societies relate to different forms of “play.” These different types exhibit themselves in their style and “rhetoric,” but closely follow the seven most common theories, each validating themselves as a form of play.

In this introductory essay concerning theories on the Purpose of play, Brian Sutton-Smith outlines the seven most common theories, and concludes that each theory validates a type of play, but that the Purpose is ambiguous because of competing “rhetorics” that may not agree with the opinions of the players.