

Playfulness in Comics

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Pursuing a decidedly interdisciplinary perspective at the intersection of game studies and comics studies, this extended abstract aims to explore how the concept of playfulness can be made productive for furthering our understanding of the production, aesthetics, and reception of contemporary comics. While playfulness has rarely been discussed in any particularly sustained way in comics studies thus far, it has, of course, become increasingly common within game studies to acknowledge that the terms “play” and “playfulness” do not refer to the same concept. While play can be considered a socially designated, organized, recognized, or otherwise “framed” activity, playfulness, in contrast, can be regarded as an attitude, mood, state of mind, or disposition that may or may not accompany a given (play) activity. Often, theorists then define playfulness in “autotelic” (Csíkszentmihályi 1975, 10) or “paratelic” (Apter 1991, 16) terms. Thus, despite differences of perspective on whether this attitude, mood, state of mind, or disposition applies mainly to free-flowing *playing* activities in the sense of *paidia* (Caillois 2001; see also, e.g., Bateson and Martin 2013; DeKoven 2014) or extends further to goal-oriented, rule-based *gaming* activities in the sense of *ludus* (Caillois 2001; see also, e.g., Apter 1991; Jørgensen 2014; Makedon 1984; Malaby 2009; Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Stenros 2015), as well as on whether playfulness should be conceptualized as being restricted to “positive” play (e.g., Bateson and Martin 2013) or as also including “transgressive” or “norm-defying” play (e.g., Stenros 2015; as well as Mortensen and Jørgensen 2020; and the contributions in Jørgensen and Karlsen 2019), most theorists of playfulness would seem to agree that it can be characterized by a (fulfilled) willingness to act spontaneously, in a state of absorption, with a lack of regard for concerns outside of an activity itself.

Beyond their differences concerning the *paidia*-based/*ludus*-based and norm-abiding/norm-subverting aspects of playfulness, autotelicity-centric theories are also notable for what they would appear to exclude in the context of designed or mediated representational works such as comics. While conceptualizations of playfulness as

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autotelic may account for the often immersive nature of the “make-believe” play associated with our engagement with representational works (e.g., Boyd 2009; Caillois 2001; Deterding 2009; Goffman 1986; Walton 1990; Winnicott 2005) and may also account for potential bouts of autotelic action during the production processes behind (some) such works (e.g., Bateson and Martin 2013; Brown 2021; Nachmanovitch 1990), they would seem to have rather less to say about why certain features or properties of representational works should be deemed playful. As at least implied by Brian Sutton-Smith’s proposal that playfulness might be productively considered as “metaplay” (1997, 147) or “that which plays with the frames of play” (1997, 148), the term “playfulness” can be associated with self-reflexive or “metareferential” (Wolf 2009, 1) features or properties serving as ruptures in and of the designed or mediated contexts of representational works (e.g., Stewart 1979; Waugh 1984; as well as Krampe et al. 2022; Thon 2021). Given metareference’s oft-positated potential to interfere with immersion (e.g., Ryan 2001; Wolf 2009; 2013; as well as Krampe 2025; Waszkiewicz 2024), such “disruptive” features of representational works are perhaps more likely to work against recipients’ autotelic engagement than facilitate it—and are, at the same time, unlikely to have resulted predominantly from autotelic action or playing during the production process, but rather from a potentially work-like form of “preconsidered, reflective creation” (Bukatman 2012, 166).

In contradistinction to this apparent restriction concerning autotelic characterizations of playfulness in the context of representational works such as comics, we thus pursue a theory of playfulness as a primarily “appropriative” or “disruptive” attitude. This theory notably draws on the work of Miguel Sicart (2014; see also Soderman 2021), but attempts to remedy the apparent limitations and contradictions implied by Sicart’s proposal to regard playfulness as “play without play” or “a way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context” (2014, 21). Within the conceptualization we propose here, the appropriative attitude of playfulness involves a desire or willingness to be free from the restrictions of the conventions of an established (play) context. This playful attitude manifests when individuals transform, reframe, or reinterpret (parts of) established situations and practices to suit their own ludic ends, whether this involves situations already designated or framed as play or less ludically oriented situations being transformed into play. Playfulness may or may not then involve autotelic action, but will necessarily disrupt, augment, or create play contexts. This conceptualization thus offers a dynamic and gradual approach to playfulness.

When applying this conceptualization of playfulness to comics contexts, we further propose three interlinked “lenses” of playfulness that focus on where, when, how, and for whom playfulness may be afforded: *producer-oriented*, *work-oriented*, and *recipient-oriented*. In terms of producer-oriented playfulness, while comics authors can be considered as creating “props” for “games of make-believe” (Walton 1990, 11), this does not mean that creative processes themselves will necessarily be interpreted, approached, or experienced as play, nor indeed as “being playful.” However, comics authors may well explicitly adopt ludic creative methods during production, which can be elaborated via textual as well as paratextual commentaries and further supported by stylistic cues within works. In terms of work-oriented playfulness, specific comics can “play with” recipients’ attempts at sense-making through self-reflexive or metareferential features that subvert expectations—as based on medial, generic, narrative, and other conventions or frames—without this resulting from consistent playing during the production process. Finally, regarding recipient-oriented playfulness, characterizing playfulness as primarily appropriative instead of autotelic

implies that “typical” forms of autotelic engagement with comics—where recipients imagine, interpret, or otherwise behave as expected—may not be considered particularly playful. As such, recipient-oriented playfulness concerns instances where comics or comics-like works encourage atypical forms of engagement, allowing recipients to “appropriate” them by affording significant ambiguity and opportunities for action (Gaver 2002; Gaver et al. 2004; see also Sicart 2014). This is not to deny that recipients may (also) playfully oppose medial, generic, narrative, and other conventions, frames, or expectations when engaging with (all kinds of) comics or comics-like works. Still, the lens of recipient-oriented playfulness mainly brings into focus how specific comics or comics-like works can afford a form of playfulness via their designs. Finally, the open nature of the lenses also aims to offer a productive starting point when analyzing the manifold ways playfulness may manifest in individual comics and comics-adjacent forms across historical and cultural contexts.

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