

to take the risk of openly participating.

Civics faced challenges of gender and age inequalities: there was a generation gap between elder residents and the leaders of the civic associations consisted basically of youth, who sometimes imposed their will on the others. This could include using violence. There were tensions between civics and unions, in part because the unions wanted to ensure their autonomy and were wary of undemocratic practices in UDF-affiliated bodies. The ANC also exercised a growing influence behind the scenes, and ANC militants were often intolerant of non-ANC voices.

However, the period of mass self-organization in the 1980s showed the possibilities of the people's self-organization and self-rule from below. It illustrated the potential for cooperation between trade unions, community based organizations, and other types—youth, cultural, sports – and unprecedented levels of solidarity. It

showed mutual help projects, which created spaces of solidarity and communal support: soup kitchens, sewing collectives, community crèches, anti-crime patrols, defense units, and people's courts.

The radical interpretation of *democracy* deserves special attention. In the 1980s, democratic *practices*, like mass meetings, the accountability of leaders and committees, were important, and people also saw democracy its value to *struggles*.

Today, many of the principles of the self-organization of the 1980s, and the very culture of radical, participatory and direct, democracy, with its obligatory and absolute accountability of community leaders, with its special love for long and open meetings, are continued by some contemporary social movements in South Africa. I think that is the legacy of the 1980s, when many people believe that democracy was not an abstract idea, but rather a tool and practice, which must be used by the whole community.

# THE PLAYFUL ANARCHIST

BY BRIAN MARTIN

Play can be an inspiration for anarchists, but care is needed because not all play is liberating.

Anarchist analysis is often seen as a serious business. It deals with the repressive aspects of the state, the exploitative features of capitalism, and the dark sides of other systems of domination, none of which seem to be laughing matters. Anarchist campaigning can be serious too, because it means coming up against agents of the state. In the syndicalist tradition, the workplace is central, and work is commonly seen as the opposite of play.

Yet there is also a playful side to anarchism. The vision of a self-managed society is one in which desires can be collectively pursued. Without the whip of bosses, people can be more spontaneous, and games can be a part of a joyful life.

Although play can and should be part of the anarchist project, the implications are not always straightforward. My aim here is to see what insights concerning the goal of self-management can be gained by looking at several areas in which play can feature: children's toys and games, sports, video games, music, activism, economic productivity, and life itself. In other words, is it worth trying to be a playful anarchist and, if so, what does this entail? Finally, I present a few possible principles for playful anarchism.<sup>1</sup>

## Children's Play

Young children can have fun, especially together, with few or no props. They can play games with imaginary characters and imaginary props. Simple objects such as balls and boxes can be the basis for hours of play.

It is possible to look at children playing and see this as the manifestation of natural human capacities, even as a model for freedom. But although children's play is innocent in the sense of having no conscious political agendas, it can never be natural in the sense of being independent of society.

Play, by necessity, draws on culture. Children who play with imaginary characters are influenced by the people and images around them. If they watch television or play video games, their imaginations will be shaped by what they see and hear, whether this is Winnie the Pooh or Harry Potter. Children's play can be spontaneous in some ways, but it is spontaneous within a framework of the ideas and images provided by the surrounding culture, including the family, peers, and media.

Then there are objects, and again they may reflect culture. It

is possible to turn parts of nature – branches, rocks, fruit – into objects for play, and this seems innocuous. More common, though, are manufactured toys. Basic types range from balls to building blocks, which may reflect social values at a general level. Then there are more elaborate toys. The most famous is Barbie, a doll both highly popular and widely criticized for incorporating stereotypes about femininity.<sup>2</sup> Barbie, at least in her original incarnation, is blond, white and exceedingly thin, a model that if blown up to adult size is an impossible ideal for more than a few women. For boys, there are various masculinized dolls such as G.I. Joe as well as numerous guns and other war toys. As exposed by feminists, what is notable is how many manufactured toys are gendered in obvious or subtle ways.

Another problem with some manufactured toys is that, by being so elaborate, they can limit imagination. A ball provides less guidance for play than a toy battleship. Some toys can only be used in certain ways: their uses are built in.

The gendering of toys can be tied to capitalist markets: there is more profit to be made by selling different toys to boys and girls, and more profit from highly elaborate toys that look fantastic in advertisements but constrain children in how they are used.<sup>3</sup> Simple, sturdy, generic toys are cheaper to produce and do not need to be replaced every year.

It is easier to point to the problems with manufactured toys than to identify the sorts of toys that best prefigure a self-managed society. Are building blocks worthwhile, or do they limit imagination for the built environment? Should toy guns be avoided and, if so, what should be in their place? Who should make decisions about what sorts of toys are produced?

## Games and Sports

Children frequently play games that are called sports. There are individual sports such as swimming and tennis, and group sports such as soccer and basketball. For children, these can be played in a spirit of fun, for the exhilaration of using one's body and engaging with others.

For children, running can be spontaneous, for example when they chase each other. Running can also be turned into a more serious endeavor, in competitive events. A child might enjoy running and be encouraged to train more systematically.

Team sports can be more or less spontaneous. Children have to learn the rules, perhaps by observing older children, but often

instruction is involved, as when a parent helps a child learn how to kick and control a soccer ball. For soccer, minimal equipment is needed. For some other sports, more is required, for example rackets and courts for tennis and clubs and courses for golf. Participation then may depend on access to facilities.

Parallel to the fun side of sports is the more serious side, with competitions, leagues, systematic training, and professional careers. In competitive sports, having fun may be subordinated to status, winning and money. Nevertheless, even for professional athletes, love of the game often remains important, if only because motivation is harder to maintain if performing is seen only as a job.

The transformation of children's play to organized games to professional sports is not an automatic or even process. As testified by the popularity of fun runs, adults can participate mainly for enjoyment, including the satisfaction of improving fitness and developing skills, without worrying too much about winning. But the parallel side, professional sport, captures much more attention. News reporting focuses on elite performers and on who is winning, and the big money is in professional sports. Some top athletes become celebrities and role models, whereas neighborhood games are known only to those involved.

The problems associated with professional sports are well known. Prestige and money lead to a preoccupation with victory rather than participation. Athletes may wreck their health by playing while injured and, in contact sports, through damage during games. Gambling and corruption are risks. Most important, though, is the decline in participation. Many children play games but give them up as they get older and can no longer compete in organized leagues. They become spectators, a process encouraged by the companies that profit from professional sports.

As professional athletes become increasingly skilled, drawing on the latest exercise science and coaching, much of the population is becoming less fit, as shown by the rise in obesity. When children's play becomes adult professional sports, participation and wholesome exercise decline.

## Video Games

The problems with manufactured toys like Barbie are one thing. Of a very different sort are the problems with video games, a major market for children and many adults. The video game industry is larger than Hollywood.

Video games can be educational, though most are just for entertainment. Many of the most popular games feature fighting enemies, sometimes with sexist and violent imagery.

For many people, both children and adults, video games are a major activity. They involve a type of play that is intensely absorbing. Video game designers seek to make their games as enticing as possible. The ideal game — Super Mario Brothers is an example — is simple to learn, so it grabs players from the first few minutes, and is continually engrossing because the challenges increase as players become more proficient. The result is the satisfying state called flow, which occurs when engaged in a task requiring skills that is neither boring nor anxiety-producing.<sup>4</sup> Good video games provide exactly the challenges that induce flow, and some players spend

hours every day on a game, and a few addicts can hardly stop. A game can be so absorbing that hours pass in a flash.

There are also online games that involve multiple players, for example World of Warcraft, that are also highly engrossing. The game goes on and on, and some players don't want to miss a single development. The game becomes a community of common spirits, an attractive alternative to the flesh-and-blood interactions that occur offline.

Should anarchists embrace or reject video games? On the negative side, many of the games are designed around violence and misogyny. However, it is also possible to design games with other values such as cooperation and egalitarianism. Also on the negative side, most games on the market are part of a massive industry whose primary aim is making money. However, some games are developed just for fun and are open source; commercialism is not an inevitable feature of video games.

Then there is the question of whether it is healthy to spend so much time interacting with a computer-generated world. For the body, outdoor games are definitely healthier. Video games can become addictive far more easily than addiction to physical exercise. Behavioral addiction is not the same as addiction to drugs but can be just as damaging.<sup>5</sup>

Yet another concern is that when video games become an alternative reality, the prospects for face-to-face human interaction are compromised. If people are to collectively make decisions about work, child rearing, services, and other issues affecting their lives, how do video games fit in? There is a problem if communication skills — being able to talk with others and discuss interests and concerns — are diminished because online activities take over. The addictive nature of video games may only be the beginning. Virtual reality can be even more captivating.

It is easy to say that anarchists should embrace play, but the addictive potential of video games suggests the embrace should not be too tight. Play needs to be balanced with other priorities.

## Music

Music, for many people, is one of the most delightful aspects of life. Unlike food and clothing, it is not required for existence. Instead, it is commonly enjoyed for its own sake. Most people listen to music, for example with iPods, radios, or at live venues. Although in some cases listening to music has a practical purpose, it is mostly for enjoyment.

Of course, music can be used to influence listeners, as in movie sound tracks, patriotic songs, or background music played in stores. Music can also be listened to in more formal settings, in churches, at rock concerts, and symphonic performances.

Music can also be enjoyed as a performer. Many people enjoy singing, even with little or no training. Many children learn to play musical instruments. Playing music can be primarily for pleasure or pursued as a career. Many children and youth learn to play instruments, and enjoy playing in bands, orchestras, and various types of ensembles. When schooling finishes, there are three main trajectories. A few of the most dedicated students continue their studies with the aim of becoming professional performers or music



teachers. A few others continue to play as amateurs. Most, though, stop playing their instruments.

In many parts of the world there is a small but thriving community of amateur musicians who get together to play solely for the love of it. It is organized by the players themselves or by networks of players coordinated by volunteers.<sup>6</sup> Decisions about what to play, when and where are usually made by consensus. People are not paid to play amateur music with each other, which means the possibilities for exploitation and domination are limited.

Professional music-making is a different story. Because it is paid work, sometimes playing becomes a chore. As well, opportunities for good jobs are limited, leading to competition and occasional sharp dealing. In some circumstances, players can be treated badly.

As a generalization, playing music is most likely to be satisfying when it is done voluntarily and cooperatively, organized by the players themselves. Amateur music is a model of self-managed activity.

It is important to mention that some professionals retain the love of their craft. In every occupation, some workers feel it is a calling, being just what they would want to do even if they were not paid. Some professional musicians continue to love playing music through their entire careers and keep playing after they retire from their paid jobs. This shows the possibility for work to be play.

### **Protest and Play**

Rallies, marches, and occupations are often seen as serious affairs, because usually protests are against some social problem such as war or racial violence. To counter the usual focus on doom and gloom, taking a humorous approach can be worthwhile.

In Serbia during the campaign against repressive president Slobodan Milosevic, the resistance movement Otpor used humor as a key tool. One stunt was to paint a picture of Milosevic on a barrel and then encourage members of the public to hit it with a stick. After police removed the barrel, Otpor announced that the barrel had been arrested! In a video looking like a washing machine advertisement, the stain on a T-shirt – a picture of Milosevic – is removed.<sup>7</sup> When the government claimed that Otpor – which was committed to nonviolence – was a terrorist organization, young Otpor activists ridiculed the government's claims by standing in front of crowds saying "This is what a terrorist looks like." In these and other actions, Otpor continually made fun of the government.<sup>8</sup>

Other groups around the world have used creative playful techniques in what have been called humorous political stunts.<sup>9</sup> When protesters are serious and present rational arguments for their concerns, those who disagree can come up with counter-arguments. When protesters use humor, this can bypass the rational mind. The use of absurdity and paradox can sometimes communicate truths more effectively than evidence and argument.

Anarchist sentiments have contributed to the history of playful activism, most notably through the Situationists and in the contemporary practice of culture jamming. Humor in protest can be deployed strategically while having a lot of fun doing it. As well, playful activism can be highly effective in attracting media attention. An extra advantage in humorous protest is that when audiences laugh, it is more enjoyable for protesters. Laughter is contagious, and humorous protest can brighten up activist planning.

### **Play and Productivity**

The usual idea is that play is something to do when work is finished. It is an optional extra in the struggle for survival, not essential but nice if you have the opportunity.

There is a quite different possibility, though: play can be pro-

ductive, in the sense that it contributes to economic performance. This is obvious enough in the vast investments in leisure activities, from sports to gaming, but there is also a more fundamental connection. At least that is the argument by Steven Johnson in his fascinating and entertaining book *Wonderland*.<sup>10</sup>

Johnson's argument is that humans' intrinsic interest in pleasure and amusement has contributed more to invention and industry than appreciated by conventional historians. He traces the popular craze for calico, an early colored cloth, and argues it was a factor in the industrial revolution. Colored clothing has no extra functional value, but it was and remains highly valued for purposes of fashion and pure delight. Johnson says the great popularity of calico was the motive force behind inventions crucial to industrialization.

The idea of shopping just to look at the goods on offer was, according to Johnson, an important social innovation that had implications for economic production. For people who find shopping a chore and deplore rampant commercialism, the idea of shopping as leisure may seem abhorrent, but many disagree, finding great pleasure in doing the rounds of shops and in buying goods, many of which are unnecessary. Johnson says calico had been available in northern Europe for over a century and only became a craze after the development of window displays, clustering of stores, and spectacular interiors.

Johnson also looks at the role of music in invention. The earliest musical instruments date back tens of thousands of years, suggesting that the inherent delight in certain types of sounds has been important in human cultural evolution. Johnson examines the origin of the idea of programmable machines, attributing some of the inspiration to the musical keyboard.

Taverns or pubs have a long history. Johnson describes a little-recognized function of pubs as incubators of free discourse, breaking down social boundaries, and even contributing to emancipatory sentiments, as in the cases of the U.S. independence struggle and the gay rights movement. The pub, as a social institution serving people's desire for pleasurable interaction, thus can also have a political significance.

Johnson's book *Wonderland* is filled with stories of the power of delight to stimulate innovation. However, he is quick to admit that play-inspired social changes are not necessarily for the better. The down side of the attraction for cotton cloth, seen as desirable for its sensual properties, was slavery and terrible working conditions. Likewise, the spice trade, driven by the sensory appeal of pepper, cloves, cinnamon and other exotic tastes, was implicated in the horrors of European colonialism. Contemporary examples can easily be provided, for example the horrible conditions for workers who produce toys and electronic gadgets.

### **Life as a Game**

One thing that makes games so enticing is that they are seen as realms separate from the messiness of regular life. In watching a football match or playing a video game, it's possible to forget about war, poverty, and workplace angst. The game has its own rules. Players and spectators do not have to worry about outside interventions. The game is self-contained, providing a sense of emotional security. Of course the separateness of games is an illusion, occasionally pierced, for example by reports of drug use or sexual abuse by football players. But for many players and spectators, it is a desirable illusion because it offers an escape from the "real world."

It is possible to use the idea of a game as a metaphor for all of life. What are the implications of seeing life as a game? One response is to seek to understand the rules and play the game

better. Interactions between people can be placed within a game framework: others are “opponents” making “moves” that can be countered by intelligent play.<sup>11</sup> In the life-is-a-game metaphor, the game of interpersonal politics is quite serious – nearly as serious as professional sports!

Another approach is to imagine life as a game as a means of overcoming excessive seriousness. The implication is to inject a sense of playfulness into daily life. Rather than being depressed by the burdens of obligation and social comparison, instead an attitude of amused detachment can be cultivated. This sort of approach has antecedents in quite a few philosophies and religions.

A few lucky individuals seem to go through life with an amused attitude, finding joy in everyday activities and seeking to brighten other people’s lives. They can be serious when necessary but do not get stuck in negativism. In the game metaphor, they are enjoying the play and not worrying too much about winning. In this, they seem to have maintained the spontaneous joy of living so often observed in young children.

Should an anarchist have a playful attitude towards life? Is it productive to adopt an attitude of lightheartedness when so many people are exploited and oppressed? Can it be beneficial to foster a playful spirit while doing what one can to bring about a better world? How can activists learn to be playful in ways that are helpful and inspirational rather than silly and awkward?

### Implications

For pursuing a self-managed society, what are the implications of play? A key point is that *play is important*. It is an aspect of freedom, which includes freedom to express creativity and joy.

Beyond this, it’s possible to identify a few principles a playful anarchist might consider. One is that play desirably should be inclusive, enabling many if not most people to participate if they so desire. In spectator sports, fans can be highly engaged and derive great pleasure from watching, but this is different from the satisfactions of personal involvement.

Another principle worth considering is cooperation. A self-managed society would operate largely through cooperation, so play desirably would likewise. However, cooperative sports are rare compared to competitive ones. There is much to be done to develop and promote cooperative games.<sup>12</sup>

Thirdly, play should be enhancing rather than destructive. It should foster better health, happiness, flow, community, and skills for self-management. This sounds like a lot to ask, but sometimes a well-designed game can achieve wonders, bonding players together in a cooperative endeavor that improves health and happiness, while coordinating the game involves self-management skills.

Although play has many desirable features, there are also some conundrums and traps. Should play be spontaneous or organized? Spontaneous activities sound like they should more playful, but sometimes spontaneity reproduces damaging patterns of interaction. It may be better to organize activities that consciously reflect goals.

Play should not be compulsory. One approach is to design opportunities for both organized and spontaneous play. Participation in play can be satisfying, yet there can be a danger of addiction. Like anything else, there can be too much of a good thing.

Finally, it is wise not to take play too seriously. For a playful anarchist, seeking to promote cooperative and participative play that enhances human capacities, it might be okay to behave less than ideally some of the time – to cheer for a favorite sporting team or to play the board game Monopoly or the video game Grand

Theft Auto – and not feel guilty. Prefiguration of a self-managed society is desirable, but it should not be such a duty as to inhibit living playfully in present-day society.

*Thanks to Sharon Callaghan and Majken Sørensen for valuable comments on a draft.*

### Notes

1. There is a vast amount of research about play. Two pioneering studies are J. Huitzinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Beacon, 1955) and Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Free Press, 1961).
2. Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (Sage, 1999).
3. Sharon Beder (ed.), *This Little Kiddy Went to Market: The Corporate Capture of Childhood* (Pluto, 2009).
4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, 1990).
5. Adam Alter, *Irresistible: Why We Can't Stop Checking, Scrolling, Clicking and Watching* (Bodley Head, 2017).
6. An example is ACMP Associated Chamber Music Players, <https://www.acmp.net>.
7. “The Stain,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEZYdGDkkV4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEZYdGDkkV4).
8. Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, *Humor and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia* (Syracuse University Press, 2015).
9. Majken Sørensen, *Humour in Political Activism: Creative Nonviolent Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
10. Steven Johnson, *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World* (Riverhead, 2016).
11. Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (Ballantine, 1964).
12. Terry Orlick, *Winning Through Cooperation: Competitive Insanity – Cooperative Alternatives*. (Acropolis, 1978).



## Charlie Chaplin vs patriotism

“As for politics, I’m an anarchist. I hate governments and rules and fetters... Can’t stand caged animals. People must be free.”  
*What is your reason, Mr. Chaplin, for never having voted?*

I don’t believe in making any divisions of people. I think that any division ... is very dangerous. I think that leads to fascism. Citizens are citizens all the world over...

*Mr. Chaplin, you also said you are not a nationalist of any country, is that correct?*

True. ...

*Now, Mr. Chaplin, the Daily Worker on October 25, 1942, reported you stated ... “I’m not a citizen, I don’t need citizenship papers, and I’ve never had patriotism in that sense for any country, but I’m a patriot to humanity as a whole. I’m a citizen of the world. [with heavy sarcasm] If the Four Freedoms mean anything after this war, we won’t bother about whether we are citizens of one country or another.” Mr. Chaplin, ... the poor fellows who were drafted like myself, and their families and buddies, resent that remark...*

I don’t know why you resent that. ... I think it is rather dictatorial on your part to say as how I should apply my patriotism. ... Now, whether you say that you object to me for not having patriotism is a qualified thing. I’ve been that way ever since I have been a young child. I can’t help it. I’ve traveled all over the world, and my patriotism doesn’t rest with one class. It rests with the whole world – the pity of the whole world and the common people...

*Charlie Chaplin: Interviews*. University Press of Mississippi, 2005.