

## Working on Playing

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As the Acting Director of the Indiana Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies, it is my pleasure to welcome you to our eleventh annual Workshop. And how suitable it is that our Center should have an *acting* director in a year when our theme is “Play.” I am not an *actual* director, but an acting one—I play one, but I do not have to *work* at being one. This gives me great freedom—or, at least, it seems it ought to do so.

Pondering our theme for this year, I was reminded of something said by one of my nephews when he was about three. He had been watching television at his grandparents’ house—his parents did not have one at home—and at the end of the program (it was *Sesame Street*), he said in tones of great surprise: “Mama, they just said ‘Children’s Television Workshop.’ That’s silly. Children don’t have workshops. Children play.” I wondered if some might be tempted to say something similar about holding a serious scholarly conference—a *workshop*—on play. In picking this as our theme, did we inadvertently admit that we have already exhausted all the important issues of our day? (After all, the Center’s workshops have covered: Forms of Life, Death, War, the Self, and even the Unconscious) Or did we, rather, come up with a rubric that brings all of these—and more—together? “The great archetypal activities of human society,” wrote Johan Huizinga, “are all permeated with play from the start.” And if we turn to his description of puppy play (a topic dear to my heart) at the beginning of *Homo Ludens*, we find it characterized by:

- invitations to play that are ceremonious in attitude and gesture (in other words, a call for papers)
- that the puppies keep to the rule that you shall not bite, or at least not bite hard, your brother’s ear; and they pretend to get terribly angry
- and, what is most important, they plainly experience tremendous fun and enjoyment.

I anticipate—but not being a libertine, I do not plan my plays so carefully as to be able to predict—that these same qualities will be true of our activities over the next few days. And perhaps at the end we will re-christen this the Bloomington Eighteenth-Century Studies Playgroup.

Now, as for the rules of the game:

1. We have asked commentators to begin each session with 5-10 minutes of remarks, after which the authors of the papers under discussion will be invited to respond. We then open the floor for questions and discussion. In order to keep things both orderly and conversational, we ask that when you want to intervene, you indicate so in one of two ways. If you want to raise a new question or make a comment, raise your hand in the usual fashion. If you want to say something that follows directly, AND BRIEFLY, from a previous statement, make the “little” gesture with your thumb and forefinger. These “little” comments really do need to be brief, conversational, and on topic since they allow you to “jump the queue” of people with new questions or more expansive comments. Please do not abuse this privilege!

2. Because these conversations are the bulk of our activity as a group—they, not the papers, constitute the “workshop”—we are going to experiment this year with recording them, transcribing them, and then publishing them. To this end, you should all have release forms, indicating that you are willing to have your words recorded, transcribed, and published. I would like to record the first session so it would be great if you could complete those forms and give them back to me immediately.
3. We try to keep things as conversational as possible. This is facilitated by us all knowing each other, so we need at this juncture to go around and introduce ourselves [which happened].
4. And, finally, you will have noted that tomorrow afternoon we have a somewhat different format, a debate on gambling. In preparation for that, I need to explain one last set of rules and to ask the protagonists—my colleagues from the English Department, Richard Nash and Jesse Molesworth—to ante up. Since, in a debate, we need interventions to follow each other in an a/b/a/b structure, we need a way for you to indicate the side for which you intend to speak. Those who want to speak in favor of the resolution, “Gambling is a rational activity,” must hold one of these green pencils. Those who want to oppose the resolution must hold one of these red ones. And those who do not want to speak, but who want to vote on who wins—they must hold a blue pencil. I have a dozen of each color and the pencils—when bought from me—go for a dollar each. Richard and Jesse, as the captains of the two debate teams, will ante up in buying “their” pencils (green for Richard’s side, red for Jesse’s) from me. They may, of course, then re-sell the pencils to the rest of you for whatever price they like.