

AMUSEMENT, DELIGHT, WHIMSY, AND WIT, THE PLACE OF HUMOUR IN HUMAN CREATIVITY

Edith K. Ackermann¹

Abstract

People generally respond to humour, i.e., they are inclined to smile at something funny. People also crack jokes and, starting at age two, human infants engage in pretence or fantasy play. Research on creativity, for its part, has either ignored the trickster within, or it gives our fascination with the bizarre a mixed press. The same goes, to a lesser extent, of playfulness. Among cognitivists in particular, the benefits of play are often seen as a spark to spur the pursuit of rationality. This essay addresses creative individuals' uses and appreciation of whimsy as an oblique way of looking at the world that brings about new insights. Coming at things "obliquely"—through suspension of disbelief (pretence), artful détournement (displacements), and playful exaggeration (looking at things from unusual angles)—allows to break loose from the habitual. And as we venture off and let our mind's eye err, we start noticing things that we usually take for granted. A greater focus on the virtues of whimsy is important, especially at a time when constructionism itself often gets equated with hands-on, making stuff, and building. We use the emblems of the craftsman, the trickster, and the poet to illustrate the insight-led musings characteristic of creative people, whether artists, scientists, or children. Such musings and the sense of exhilaration they procure are at the core of what it means to be playful beyond curious, and insightful beyond industrious.

Keywords Incongruity , pretence, playfulness, mindfulness, trickster, craftsman, poet

1. Introduction

The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh. Cicero, On the Orator

Like play itself, humour is hard to define, and its role in human creativity remains to this day under-explored. The most widespread, and still controversial, view among researchers is that the sense of amusement that arises from our appreciation of humour is a response to the perception of *incongruities*. James Beattie was among the first to point out that humorous laughter (our smiling at something funny) occurs when “two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or *incongruous* parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, are acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them (1779. 320).” In a similar way, Immanuel Kant (a contemporary of Beattie) saw laughter as an affection that arises from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation *into nothing*. To Kant, however, this transformation is of no use *to understanding*: “A joke amuses by evoking, shifting, and dissipating our thoughts, *but we do not learn anything through these mental gymnastics. In humour, our reason*

¹ Edith(at)media(dot)mit(dot)edu. MIT, School of Architecture..

finds nothing of worth, even if the jostling of ideas produces a physical jostling of our internal organs and we enjoy that physical stimulation” (1911 [1790], Part I, Sec. II. 54). Such unimpressed views on the potential of whimsy can be traced back to times unmemorable. Greek philosopher Plato, in particular saw laughter as an emotion that overrides human rationality and self-control. And Aristotle, while recognizing the virtues of wit in conversations, still portrayed humour as a wearisome form of *educated insolence*, i.e., the clever expression of underlying scorn. In *Nicomachean Ethics* (4, 8) he warns that: “Most people enjoy amusement and jesting more than they should “. This pretty much sums it up for the rationalist’s take on the benefits of whimsy!

A different and much more generous take on humour can be found in Arthur Koestler’s definition of humorous laughter as “a luxury reflex, which could arise *only in a creature whose reason has gained a degree of autonomy from the urge of emotion, and enables him to perceive his own emotions as redundant – to realise that he has been fooled.*” (1964. 96). In *The act of creation*, Koestler treats humour and creativity on an equal foot, and he defines both as highly evolved forms of human expression, none of which can be understood in terms of reason or instinct alone. Instead, according to Koestler, all require “the perceiving of a situation or idea...in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference.” Koestler calls “bisociation” the act of shifting between—and bringing together in new ways—different “matrices of thought.” And he offers countless examples of the sense of surprise (awe, amusement) and *quid pro quo* (double entendre) that arise from the juxtaposition of otherwise unlikely “orders of things“. Important in Koestler’s perspective is the emphasis on the place of artful displacement, playful exaggeration, and suspension of disbelief, in human creativity, whether humorous, scientific, or artistic.

1.2. Wit and whimsy – homage to humour

Wit is best defined as the keen perception and cleverly apt expression of the otherwise unnoticed, in ways that disconcert, amaze, and delight. And **whimsy** points to the surprises that arise from looking at things in more than one way, or obliquely. Both wit and whimsy call for a playful attitude: a mind set that, for no apparent reason, allows itself to change its mind (in a whim), to leap, and to shift gears! To this day, the “trickster within” is seen as a potentially disruptive force. Yet the lightness of being and the sense of divertissement associated with our abilities to produce and enjoy humour are at the core of the insight-led musings characteristic of creative individuals.

In Ackermann (2011), I have shown that our rational minds’ eagerness to predict, explain, and validate our currently held beliefs (make sure we are right) is important yet insufficient, and quite different, from a creative person’s abilities to engender and use insights for the sake of unveiling otherwise “hidden truths”. Both require curiosity, engagement, and skills. Both emerge from a desire to *take a walk on the wild side* and to see what’s on the other side of the fence. Yet, the ways of defining and monitoring progress, the criteria of rigor (show vs. tell, implement vs. demonstrate) and the tolerance to uncertainty are different. In what follows, I discuss how creative individuals, children, scientists, or artists, make sense of their experience, envision alternatives in their minds, and bring forth new insights, in ways that can *move* beyond seeking *proof*. Being mindfully engaged, adopting a beginner’s mind, and letting our mind drift, seem good ways to get started!

2. Mindfulness and playfulness: a beginner’s mind set

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.”
—Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind

Mindfulness, to Ellen Langer, is about *putting our mind into what we're doing at the moment we're doing it* (1989) and, in this sense, is akin to Csíkszentmihályi's notion of "flow" (1990). The relevance of mindfulness to human creativity is that, beyond engagement and endurance, it keeps us alert, in it for surprises, and willing to look at things twice—*as if* for the first time! Mindlessness, in contrast, comes as a result of having it all figured out. Experts are especially prone to becoming mindless whenever they put themselves on autopilot, rely heavily on acquired skills, or blindly apply standards: whenever they cease to look at what they know as a potential obstacle in disguise!

2.1. Mindless, mindful — When Knowing Gets in the Way of Seeing

At the core of Langer's idea of **mindlessness** lies a paradox: *the more we know the more likely we are to act mindlessly*. Langer mentions three potential sources of mindlessness: categorical thinking, acting or thinking from a single perspective, and habituation. Each comes with its pros and cons. Categorical thinking, i.e., grouping things into pre-established categories may be vital for effectively operating in the world. Yet imposing our order also puts us at risk of ignoring whatever doesn't fit in: we become extreme assimilators, unable to see, let alone incorporate, any odds. Likewise, thinking from a single perspective, or going down a set path, satisfies the "cognitive miser" in us. Yet meticulously following a set path, without budging when no perceived benefits arise locks us in. Lastly, once our habitual ways of doing and thinking become *second nature*, we may gain in fluency. Yet, our acquired habits also get in the way as soon as the conditions change.

Being mindful, in contrast, is defined as a continual and active quest for novelty—and novelty is not here to be seen as a call for more external stimuli! As Langer points out, you can read a book many times and bring to it something new every time. It is thus a person's investment—not the stimuli—that makes things interesting. In my view, more than a quest for novelty *per se*, it is our readiness to take a next step and see where it may take us, which make for mindful engagement. Children, in this sense, are naturally mindful, even as they play! Always in the moment, curious, and delighted when things are not as they appear, they repeat what captivates them a hundred times, and each time, they discover something new along the way. Think of a toddler learning to walk. She pulls herself up, takes a few steps, and plops down. With that determined look on her face, she then gets up again, and down, and up. Unlike children, creative adults have to *cultivate* the art of mindfulness. They are creative *by design*, deliberately playful, and they consciously use brainstorming technique and other heuristic devices to get themselves into a beginner's mindset.

2.2. Beginner's Mindset: As If for the First Time — When curiosity meets playfulness

A beginner's mind rids itself of the "been there, done that" attitude. It's a reminder that if we got it all figured out, chances are we won't pay attention. We'll get frustrated because we expect one thing and it doesn't happen that way. Beginner's mindset involves *being there* and *looking out*—with the understanding that if you keep looking you are bound to see something new, which, in turn, can be exciting and calls for more. Note that adopting a beginner's mind is not about negating a mature person's experience, or expertise. It's about refreshing it by letting our minds wonder anew, at each step, and refusing to apply what we know without constant re-examination. The main difference between **mindfulness and playfulness**, as I see it, is that the latter implies a nonliteral take on things (via suspension of disbelief), thereby shielding the pursuit of otherwise "dangerous ideas" from potential harmful consequences. One of the most overlooked implications of this is that a person can be curious and not very playful! Beyond trial-and-error, that is, playfulness requires that we embark in the art of "possibilizing" (by turning the familiar into the extraordinary), which in turn is achieved by unleashing our imagination beyond clinging to the familiar!

In what follows, I illuminate the forces at play in human creativity through the portraits of three “personae” that respectively epitomize the maker, trickster, and poet within. All three, I suggest, are co-present in creative individuals, whether artists, scientists, or young children.

3. The ways of the craftsman: Caring for things well done

“Craftsmanship is an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake.”
—Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*

Through mindful immersion, the craftsman establishes a deep connection between head, eye, hand, and tool (or machine). And as he perfects his art, the materials at hand are made to talk back through their resistances, ambiguities, and by the ways they change as circumstances change. An enlightened craftsman enjoys such a dialogue and, in doing, s/he develops an “intelligent hand” and a “perceiving mind”: S/he becomes at one with the materials. Richard Sennett groups craftsmen into three types: *Homo Faber*, *Homo Laborans*, and *Homo Ludens*. *Homo faber* (maker) is the creator and judge of material labor and practice. *Homo laborans* (worker) takes the task at hand as an end in itself. *Homo ludens* (player) is absorbed in exploring for the sheer pleasure of it. All require an urge to perfect and the skills to deliver, and yet the “techniques” of a craftsman are anything but a mindless application of pre-written rules. Instead, Sennett writes: “Every good craftsman conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking; this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem-solving and problem-finding. There is nothing inevitable about being skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself.” (2008. 9). Architect Renzo Piano has this to add about repetition and practice: “You think and you do *at the same time*. You draw and you make. Drawing is revisited. You do it, you redo it, and you redo it again. That’s where the pleasure lays” (ibid. 40).

4. Tricksters, jesters, and clowns – a hymn to the creatures of mischief

“Every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew.”—Paul Rodin
“We interpret them always as transients.”—Frank Kermode

The disruptive side of human imagination is epitomized by the figure of the “joker” (trickster, jester, and clown). Emblematic of artistic and cultural renewal, the *trickster* fascinates for how he transgresses boundaries. The *jester* is a licensed fool employed by monarchs to amuse the court and dispense hard truths. And the clown is meant to be funny for turning things topsy-turvy. All three put much seriousness and artistry into their feats: Without technique, a clown would be ridiculous, a trickster pitiful, and the jester fired!

Tricksters – Provocateurs by excellence, tricksters are out to satisfy their inordinate appetites. Always at the edge, in between, and over-the-top, they make it their job to cross the line and blur distinctions. The trickster is a figure of mischief. Like circus people, he belongs to the periphery, and won’t use his power for the sake of conformity. At once a mindful provocateur and a playful spirit, his view is oblique *because* he doesn’t belong. Trickster is a permanent wanderer.

Jesters - In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Feste, the jester, is described as “a man wise enough to play the fool.” Jesters were hired for their wit, and their role was to entertain and amuse the court

(play music, juggle, tell riddles, sing, and dance). Taking advantage of the license to mock, these highly skilled itinerant performers (regarded and dressed as fools but acting like magicians) enjoyed the privilege to dispense frank observations and highlight the follies of those who ridiculed them. Only as the lowest member of the court could the jester be a monarch's trusted adviser.

Clowns – Clowns, as we know them, mostly employ slapstick or similar types of physical humour, in a mime style. They appear in outlandish costumes, and wear make-up, red noses, colourful wigs, and oversized shoes. From Pierrot to Harlequins their act may vary. Clowns can be feared by children—and adults—if they appear outside their “natural” circus environment. Their appearance, while meant to be funny, can be awkward. Masks can be scary. You don't know what hides behind!

Tricksters, jesters, and clowns are all about exaggeration made into an art form (in this case foolishness). They turn the familiar into the alien and the ridiculous into the ordinary! Like in theatre (or a child's pretence/fantasy play) the “unreality” of a staged act makes its truth acceptable. Yet, not all acts are equally illuminating. James Hillman puts it well when he writes, “What we distrust in fantasizing and imagining is the revelation of the uncontrollable aspects of our psyche. The removal of ‘fixation’ is possible through playful—and sometimes painful—displacement, characteristic of the trickster: now this and now that; now here and now there; peek-a-boo. A trickster pulls your leg, not as in deceiving but as in pretending, exaggerating, stirring.” (Hillman, 1975, 179). The line between what's funny and the uncanny can, at times, get blurry. Incongruity and disruption *per se* are no warrants of playfulness or enjoyment. The context itself needs to be safe—and the play signals “readable”—for the joker's acts (enactments) to be taken non-literally.

“Jokers” as strangers - The stranger, notes Georg Simmel, learns the art of adaptation more searchingly, if not more painfully, than people who feel entitled because they belong to a community of settlers —and who know, and often own, their surrounds. In Simmel's view, foreigners hold up a mirror to the society into which they enter, for as strangers they cannot take for granted the ways of life that seem so natural to natives. Humans are skilled makers of a place for themselves. Yet only the senses of displacement and estrangement, characteristic of creative people and travellers, can drive the practices of change and open the way to cultural renewal (1964).

5. Of poets and muses –insightful to enlivened

“Every man is a poet when he is in love.”—Plato

More than the craftsman, and maybe better than the jester, the poet seeks inspiration through the inner voices (of whom he is a mouthpiece)! When the poet uses words, the words sing and dance, when s/he uses images, they reverberate. In *The Mythologization of Reality*, Bruno Schultz writes of the poet, “In his/her hands the word comes to its senses about its essential meanings, it flourishes and develops spontaneously in keeping with its own laws, and regains its integrity (Schultz 1993 49–50). What makes poets different from rationalist or discursive thinkers is that they let their creations “speak” for themselves. And this, to a “constructivist”, translates into leaving enough mental room (*Spielraum*, in German) for interpretation! The best example is music. But like music, any art form breeds life. Art, like myth, is made to touch, move, evoke, and stir (inspire) and not merely geared toward building an argument, nailing it down, *explaining things away*. The poet's power comes from a reluctance to pin down the insights that “move” him/her for fear of taming his/her flame. And that is precisely why, if successful, the poet captures our imagination.

5.1 The Imaginal: Staying with the Image

Psyche is image, said Jung, and when we feel alive we rely on the *imaginal* to guide our reason. Note that *image* is not to be understood here as a picture in the head, or a photographic snapshot of the world. The *imaginal* doesn't represent, it brings forth (into being) what we usually omit. What's more, in Jungian parlance, *sticking to the image* doesn't imply that we get locked into a single insight, vision, or mode of envisioning. It is not about being mesmerized. Instead, it calls on our abilities to *see the bear in the bush, the bush as a bear, and the light through the bush* (see things in more than one way) and continually look out for—stay in touch with—Psyche's own capricious nature and untamed sagacity! To Jung, the psyche is “real” only to the extent that it constantly opens up new possibilities and provides new insights. The psyche uses fiction and fantasy to find its ways, and the images engendered are exactly as they appear: illuminating as long as they last, never standing still, indefinable except through their intertwining. The sensual qualities of an image—its form, colour, and texture—are not copied from nor do they substitute reality, as is the case for visions or hallucinations. The truth of the *imaginal* is that it produces guiding fictions whose function is to bring forth the ineffable, multiple, polymorphic character of our psyche (Jung, 1944).

5.2. Seeing and doing — imagine to create

For Cassirer, like Goethe, there is creation in the very act of seeing, and Cassirer calls “productive imagination” the unconscious ideation that accompanies any act of perception. The distinctive feature of artistic imagination is that it further abolishes the opposition between content (latent) and form (manifest). For Cassirer, art, like myth, is not representational or discursive: It performs. Echoing Cassirer and Goethe, Gaston Bachelard warns against the temptation to study images and words as signs, and then claim that any well-formed strings of signs can echo what they stand for. In *Poetics of space* (1994), he posits that, unlike signs, symbols are lived, experienced, re-imagined in an act of consciousness that restores at once their timelessness and their newness. To fall into nominalism, he claims, is a poet's nightmare. It eclipses the power of words and proceeds to their systematic sterilization by tearing them apart from the substrate in which they reside. Along with Bachelard, I doubt that any artist, scientist, or philosopher could move or touch us if the expression of their insights were not allowed to breathe and breed life. There is no knowledge without imagination, no imagination without playfulness or suspension of disbelief, and no creative act without bringing our fantasies (visions) to life, and back into the world (make dreams come true).

6. Arts, science, and human creativity – Same questions, different journeys

All branches of human experience—science/philosophy/arts/mythology— are invested in a quest for “truths”. And in their mature form, each offers their own unique windows into the workings of the human mind—as well as the (hu)man-made word in which we live. The views also vary in significant ways.

6.1. Reconciling the Poet and the Rationalist—and learning from the children!

Reuniting the artist and the scientist “within” would be the equivalent of reinventing a Renaissance man, following Robert Storr's motto: “*Pensa con I sensi, Senti con la mente*” (Think with your senses, mindfully), which became the call for the 2007 Venice Art Biennale. It would require a fine and not-so-easy-to-achieve balance along the continuum of a set of opposites, as shown below:

<i>making sense</i>	<i>making sure</i>
<i>made to move</i>	<i>meant to prove</i>
<i>perceives</i>	<i>conceives</i>
<i>illuminates</i>	<i>demonstrates</i>
<i>fanciful</i>	<i>factual</i>
<i>offers insights</i>	<i>give reasons, provide evidence</i>
<i>show me how you see it</i>	<i>tell me how it is</i>
<i>evokes</i>	<i>explains</i>
<i>enacts</i>	<i>describes</i>
<i>figurative</i>	<i>literal</i>
<i>allegoric</i>	<i>prosaic</i>
<i>delights, amuses</i>	<i>argues, convinces</i>

The main differences between the two columns, as I see them, is (1) the evocative v. literal uses of symbols or signs; (2) the importance attributed to insight (i.e., discovery) vs. proof (i.e. justification) in the quest for understanding; and (3) the different exploratory (“what if-” vs. “if then-” driven) as well as expository styles (show vs. tell; reveal vs. explain). Let me elaborate:

To *the poet*, we have seen, the power of a word (or image) resides in the fact that it tenses and strains to produce a thousand associations. And what the poet warns us against is the uses of words (or images) for the mere purpose of explaining things away, or proving a point. Conventional and arbitrary signs, in other words, may be useful if the intent is to build an argument, or justify a statement, but their evocative power can remain limited: “As we manipulate everyday words, we [shouldn’t] forget that they are fragments of ancient stories, that we are building our houses with broken pieces of sculptures and ruined statues of gold as the Barbarians did.” (Schultz, *ibid.*, 88). *The rationalist* instead is more of a Saussurean. S/he wants the words to signify and cringes when their meanings are *sticky* (fused to their contexts) or *thick* (ambiguous or polysemic). The focus is on distinguishing (fleshing out) and categorizing (grouping, ordering) rather than fusing and blending. S/he seeks consistency over ambiguity. He is a problem-solver more than a bricoleur!

What’s to be learned from *the children* is that, like a “renaissance man” (yet for different reasons) they assign new roles to the voices within, through a masterly—and trickster-like— *tour de force*. Let me put it this way: because they “don’t know better”, children (unknowingly) tend to *let the poet reason, the jester rule* (as in “let’s say I’m the wolf”) and *the craftsman dream!* The adaptive advantage of such early in-differentiations is that they allow the growing child to look out for possibilities without losing their grounds, and to pursue interests without knowing in advance. In addition to holding their own “theories” (imposing their order), that is, the children are “shape grammarians” in George Stiny’s sense (Stiny, 2006): they let their senses guide and their minds meander. Starting at age two, children naturally engage in playful explorations, imaginary projections, and symbolic recreations. And this in turn allows them to move between realms (here-now, then-there) and to come to see things anew, or obliquely, through playful re-enactments (revisit, recast) and suspension of disbelief (do as if).

6.2. Design, Creativity, and Suspension of disbelief

Play is the answer to how anything new comes about. Jean Piaget

The playful musings characteristic of creative individuals are particularly relevant in design inquiry, where whatever it takes to engender new forms can't be at the image of what's *out there*—since not much is out there yet! Thus designers, like craftsmen, are left with evolving their designs *on the go!* What is true of design is also true of other constructive processes. Most striking in this respect is children's natural tendency to invent for themselves the tools and mediations they need to navigate a world by definitions beyond their mastery. Children's extraordinary talent as self-directed learners comes in great part from their ability to let their minds wander (mostly through play), while, at the same time, ensuring their grounds (feel safe), which allows them to venture in uncharted territory. Doing *as if* and playing *what if* are some of the techniques they use to achieve this balance. We also know from research on pretence and fantasy play (Ackermann, 2011) that a child's ability to engage in make-believe acts requires a decoupling not unlike the bisociation Arthur Koestler alluded to regarding humour. And indeed, if a three-years old hops across a room using a broom „as if“ it were a horse, s/he well knows that the broom is not “really” a horse. Yet she rides it, undisturbed and amused! Likewise, a child who talks to her imaginary companion or drinks out of empty cups is neither delusional nor confused. She is just playing, and playing—like humour itself—opens a breach to seeing things in a different light. Without decoupling, or bisociation, no digression would be possible, no ambiguity or uncertainty embraced, and no surprise enjoyed. As humans, we would not only lack a sense of humour but we would miss out on the opportunity to grant ourselves the mental “elbow room“ needed to free the *cognitive miser within* from digging itself into a hole. It takes a trickster to let the genie out and help us see anew.

6.3. Lessons for learning – Constructivism and the practice of design

Designing (*proiettare* in Italian) is the flipside of reflective abstraction. To design is to give form or expression to how we see, feel, and think, through an iterative process of mindful concretization, or materialization of ideas (*concrétisation réfléchie* in French). Ideation, on the other hand, is about holding on to our views, as well as calculating and drawing conclusion, in our head. Both design (projecting) and ideation (mentalizing) are at play as we attempt to get a handle on ill-defined problems, ask better questions, or gain new insights. And both involve their share of trial-and-error, re-visitations, and detours. Yet, reconciling the tinkerer and the thinker within won't *per se* ensure that we navigate our world creatively, or imaginatively. What matters instead is a willingness to “let go” of our habitual ways by stepping sidewise—antennas out, and in it for surprises!. In other words, beyond our rational mind's temptation to plan ahead and to stick to the plan (unless proven wrong or irrevocably cornered), and the blind maker's insight-less errings, the playful wanderer enchants us through his own wondrous musings. S/he knows to look at things obliquely, cares to see what others don't, and uses his/her intelligent hand—and connection to the materials—to bring forth the unexpected. Along with my mentor, Jean Piaget, I think that projecting meaning into the objects of our experience (by “assimilating” what we see to what we know) is a pillar of cognitive adaptation. Following Seymour Papert, I like to put greater emphasis on the accommodative pole of adaptation (giving-in to the odds to rethink the obvious). This doesn't come without complications within a constructivist framework! At the cost of caricaturing, let me put it this way: fellow constructivists often seem to ignore that, once launched, an artefact takes on a life of its own, thus transcending both the author's intentions and any singular act of interpretation. In my words, a designer's dream may or may lurk behind his creations. Yet every creative act (gesture or trace) also breads an ever-changing life of its own, and is up for grabs. Creative users surprise us by re-appropriating and tweaking (subverting) whatever they see as being in it for them, at any moment!

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