

Playing with Things

The archaeology, anthropology
and ethnography of human–object
interactions in Atlantic Scotland

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A heuristic study

This book presents my encounters with play. It is a huge subject but my own particular interest lies with play as it exists in the archaeological record and was sparked by my encounters with play things during archaeological excavations. The material is interesting, and varied, yet I was frustrated by the available discussions since it seemed to me that they made no effort to get to grips with the subject. A typical archaeological site report might list the gaming pieces recovered, give their dimensions and describe the materials used, and then simply leave it at that. A good site report might include comparanda, discuss the date of the pieces and perhaps make a stab at identifying the game. I, however, wished to find out more about play generally, what it is and how and why people do it. I thought that if I did that then I would be able to look at the archaeological material with fresh eyes and perhaps reach a better understanding of how people lived at certain times, and places, in the past.

My approach has been taken from an anthropological direction because I felt that this discipline would have more to say about play, since it must be encountered routinely during anthropological fieldwork, and that it (anthropology) should have the theoretical depth by which it can be better understood.

Accordingly, as part of this study, I carried out fieldwork with modern people who play games. I gained a huge amount of information concerning play from this process, knowledge which is not available through archaeological techniques, and I then used these insights when I turned to my archaeological case studies. My study has also been reflexive, however; if I have applied my understanding of play to the archaeology, then the archaeology has also added something of its own to the whole; it has I hope contributed a unique twist to play studies.

I should also state here that the subject of this study is play and not the archaeology of play. I have explored the archaeology because it is what I know and because I knew beforehand that even if there are obvious lacunae in archaeological approaches to play there are also rich seams of material there. I go into more detail on the main themes of this book below, and as will become clear, these are not the things which one finds in typical site reports, or even in more general syntheses.

I call this a 'heuristic' study because I allowed myself to be led by my findings, rather than set out with a well-defined issue to explore, or problem to solve. I have not followed any overarching theme, other than the desire to find out more about play. I

have simply followed those aspects which I found rewarding and insightful and these, as it turns out, are mostly cognitive; they are concerned with memory, the interaction between people and things, and the playful, or ludic, nature of life.

This study

When I began, I carried out a survey of the information available on the prehistory of Scotland, with the aim of gaining a general impression of the nature of the evidence for play, from the Mesolithic period onwards. The sources used comprised published excavation reports, in particular those in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (PSAS), the journal of record from the beginnings of archaeological research in Scotland until the late 1990's. I have also consulted other publications such as the PSAS monographs (printed and online) together with various other site reports published elsewhere. As part of this, I visited museum collections in Orkney, Shetland and Edinburgh. I include my own fieldwork and experiences of excavation on various sites across Scotland, and make use of unpublished material from this fieldwork. I believe my survey to be thorough and representative.

One of the results of this survey was that I found it very difficult to identify any good evidence for play, in the form of board games, prior to early in the first millennium AD: one theme which emerged rather quickly concerns the problems with recognising the evidence for play in the archaeological record. I had no fixed criteria for this, however I was more interested in material culture, so did not pursue monumental structural features such as henges, or stone circles, or horned cairns, all of which could be interpreted in terms of performance and play, and I looked instead for the small objects which might once have been used as gaming pieces. It is difficult to define exactly what a gaming piece should look like, and I came across many contenders. Some artefacts are difficult to categorise and their purpose is ultimately unclear, for example, carved stone balls, or the carved stone objects from Neolithic sites such as Skara Brae, Pool or Quoyness in Orkney (figure 1). Some objects have also been treated in interesting ways which seem to make them stand out, for example by the application of decoration or their movement over long distances. David Clarke, Trevor Cowie and Andrew Foxon discussed many of these types of artefact (1985) and interpreted them in terms of power, prestige and display but their use probably also entailed ludic or play elements. The use of a carved stone ball, for example, may have required the adoption of roles for the participants. The ceremonies and situations in which it was used may have been more play-like than ritualistic. In the same vein, my review encountered many sites which could be just as easily interpreted in terms of play: henges and stone circles, for example, provide venues for performance; the areas delineated in front of the entrances to some tombs, such as horned cairns, would have set the participants in the ceremonies apart from the onlookers. Also, Chris Gosden (1994) has usefully discussed the way in which the form of temporality associated with these massive early monuments, such as Avebury, served to set them



Figure 1. Neolithic Carved Stone Ball from Links of Noltland, Westray, Orkney.

apart and it is *as useful*, I would argue, to view these monuments in terms of play as it is to interpret them in terms of ritual. I deal with the question of how to identify play in more detail in chapter 7 below.

The Study Area

When I began in earnest, then, my area of archaeological interest lay in a certain time and place: the Atlantic Iron Age of Scotland. The area includes the Northern and Western Isles together with parts of the Scottish mainland. The Iron Age in Scotland is usually taken to have a beginning around 800BC and continues to late in the 1 millennium AD, (Ritchie & Ritchie 1991) only coming to an end with the onset of Viking contacts from late in the 8 Century (Crawford 1987, Woolf 2007). I was aware that there was a large body of material which might be of interest and this particular material, as it turned out, was restricted more or less to the 1 millennium AD. In the event, I have stretched my Iron Age to include some material conventionally attributed to ‘Viking’ incomers, simply because it seemed too good to leave out. After this point, the picture becomes much more complex, not only in terms of the evidence for play but also as regards the types of evidence (literary references, in several different languages, become much more relevant) and the context – the large scale political and economic changes which are underway towards the end of the 1 millennium are by, say, AD1200, widespread and all encompassing: Iron Age Atlantic Scotland is no more.

The nature of the assemblages straight away pointed me in certain directions, and it was clear that most of the evidence derived from board games, as opposed to sport or physical contests. A consideration of play in the Roman world, for example, would naturally include structures such as amphitheatres, and sports like gladiatorial combat or funeral games, but this kind of site or activity seems to be lacking, or simply not visible in the Scottish Iron Age (though see chapter 6 for an alternative view).

With board games in mind, then, I turned to the anthropological side of my study and decided to begin with chess and chess players. I attended a chess club in Edinburgh and also one in mainland Orkney. These were both very interesting places and my strategy was simply to turn up and take part while paying close attention to how people played the game and how they interacted with each other. I had no underlying theories which I wished to explore, and I simply wanted to see what might turn up, but having said this I did have an interest in memory, as an active and skilful process, and was keen to see if chess might add something to my understanding. In the event, I believe that chess was a good place to start because it is a very clear example of this type of board game. The rules are not difficult and are entirely logical – one reason why it is frequently used by cognitive psychologists (Gobet et al 2004) in experimental settings. I found chess to be interesting and useful, however if there was a problem it was that chess players do not talk very much during play, preferring instead to concentrate and then (unfortunately) leave quickly at the end. This was particularly true in the Edinburgh Chess Club, where I spent most of my time. In Orkney the club was much more relaxed (meetings took place in a bar), however I still could see that there was a problem relating the game to its setting. I wanted to find out more about how a game and its players functioned as part of a small scale community, something which was difficult to appreciate in a city like Edinburgh where players came from very different backgrounds and places, and even in Orkney, since the players here came from all over the county to take part.

My solution was to step sideways and look at a card game, euchre, but this time the game took place on a small island in the Orkney, Westray. Here, I could examine how an extremely close-knit community played together and trace the connections between the play and life more generally on the island. I also had the advantage of living and working on Westray for many years as part of my job and thus knew many of the people who took part, as well as having a good general knowledge of how the island functioned, economically and socially. I was able to identify similarities between the play and life generally on the island, in terms of a kind of *following* (see chapter 3 below). I do not, however, mean to draw a tight comparison, or to say, for example, that since Westray is a certain kind of society that it must only play certain kinds of games, or that there is an ‘evolutionary’ way of understanding the relationship – there is a theory that if societies develop through identifiable stages, for example from tribe or chiefdom through to industrialist state (Service 1962, 1975), then so should the games that people play: this is a common theme in some play studies, (see Sutton Smith 1997, 82-83 and Guttman 1994).

The other advantage of studying euchre is that, as a card game, it is a type of play which incorporates an element of chance – cards are dice-like in that the pack serves as a random generator, throwing up cards and combinations of cards in unpredictable ways. It therefore offered insights into games of chance, which was useful for my analysis of paralleloiped dice (a specific form of bone four sided dice, see Chapter 5 below).

The archaeology of play

When I moved on to a consideration of the archaeological evidence for play I faced some very real problems. The greatest of these is undoubtedly the question of how one identifies play in the archaeological record (see Chapter 7 below). This problem became more and more relevant because as I found out more about play I was slowly coming around to the belief that it is not always so set apart and I found many cases where the archaeology was ambiguous.

The boundaries between play and ritual, are acknowledged to be difficult to define (see Lévi-Strauss 1966, Turner 1969, Schechner 2002) but I found that the boundaries between play and ‘real life’ are also ‘fuzzy’. Having said this, I could at least focus on a few cases which seemed, to me, to be definitely play oriented, which is how my archaeological case studies were arrived at: counters (chapter 4), paralleloiped dice (chapter 5), and Tafl (an ancient board game, somewhat like chess, see chapter 6). These three examples form the core of my archaeological study; they also, conveniently, span the 1 millennium AD and allowed me to consider something of the changes which occurred in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland during this period in tandem with changes in play; I said above that I do not follow a ‘evolutionary’ perspective yet if play is embedded in a given society then there will be links between the play and its setting which are interesting to explore.

What is Play?

What is meant by ‘play’? On one level it seems to be a very obvious thing, an activity which is engaged in by all healthy adults and children. Some theories of play may make it appear simple, but it is in reality complex. It has the ability to morph, to change constantly and quickly, to start and finish suddenly. At its heart there is a sense of something which pretends to be that which it is not. Animal play is revealing. When a dog gives a play nip, it is both biting and not biting (Bateson 1972) – it is pretending to bite, and yet does this by biting. The other dog, or human, agrees that the bite is not real but pretend: a play bite.

We all play in different ways, however, so how do we know when play is taking place? How can it be recognised and distinguished from other perhaps more ‘utilitarian’ activities? It is clear that play is something which is predominantly active and in this sense it is a process rather than a product: play only seems to be present for as long as we are actually doing it, it leaves no residue unless one includes the tools for play.

It can also, however, be an attitude or a way of looking at the world and even very serious events can be made playful, or carried out in a playful manner. Play possesses an ability to infiltrate all aspects of life, which might make the thought of its study overwhelming and impossible, however it is for the most part well-defined: we know when we are playing and when we are not.

Historically, the study of play has been dominated by attempts to define its limits and to understand the subject through classification. Given the difficulties inherent in defining 'play' in a useful or practical sense, scholars have sought instead to establish subdivisions within it. One of the earliest modern attempts to classify play, and in the process to arrive at a definition, is that of Karl Groos (1901). His approach was based on a philosophical understanding of play as something 'instinctual', an impulse which is irrepressible and must find its expression through the action of play. He thus followed a 'Nietzschean' view of play as 'a kind of irrational power' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 112-113). Groos' classification is based on the body: he categorised play according to the sensations of touch, taste and so on. Play is also, for him, primarily a children's activity, the impulse for which naturally lessens in the individual with increasing maturity. Play here arises as a form of experimentation or stretching of the body's senses towards 'real life' activity; there is no place for play once adulthood has been reached since there is no longer any need to rehearse actions which are now carried out for real. The obvious drawback to this approach is that it finds adult play problematic and must explain it as a 'hangover' or 'residue' from childhood or as an element of childishness in an otherwise mature life. This attitude, which is illustrated by Groos, remains influential and continues to inform present day attitudes to play as inherent within every person, and as naturally implicated in child development.

Johan Huizinga's study of play is undoubtedly the most influential of the 20 century. He followed Groos in as much as he saw play as 'primary' or an activity deriving from a biological or evolutionary need. For Huizinga, however, play was not pre-cultural but, rather, he asserted that 'culture arises in the form of play' (1955: 46). Huizinga did not classify *play* so much as he did *culture*, seeking to demonstrate the ways in which play is implicated in the history and formation of such cultural 'institutions' as language, war, poetry and art. Huizinga's major contribution is his definition, which can be summarised in three points (1955; 7-11):

- Play is always voluntary.
- It is well-defined in terms of both duration and location.
- Play is set apart from everyday life by the adoption of its own rules for behaviour.

A fourth point, equally important, is that play entails an uncertain outcome: without this, it drifts into the sphere of ritual (the 'favoured instance of a game', see Lévi-Strauss 1966).

For the theorists who followed Huizinga this definition has formed a foundation for most if not all further studies that is rarely, if ever, questioned. In addition, he also introduced 'Ludic' to the English language as a useful term for anything relating to play (see van Bremen 2002).

The concept of play as an activity which is always well-defined and set apart is the basis of Roger Caillois' (1962) classification of games into four main categories: Agon (competitive games, such as sports, chess, billiards), Alea (games of chance, such as betting, roulette), Mimicry (games of simulation, such as masks, disguises, theatres and 'spectacles in general') and Ilinx (games of vertigo, such as mountain climbing, skiing, horseback riding). It is with Caillois' definition that we arrive at a recognisable approximation of the basis of current play studies. Even if his categories group together types of play, such as sports and board games, which are now usually taken to be very different, it is the fact that the *qualities* of a type of play are being taken as the starting point for discussion which is important and one can see this approach where studies take those games which are considered to be similar and study them together as a group. Murray's corpus – board games other than chess - is one of the classic examples of this (1952). Here, he has grouped the games according to their qualities – chase games, war games, games of chance and so on.

If, as argued by Huizinga, play is seen as something set apart from everyday life, this makes the discussion of the relationship between play and other aspects of culture problematic. Clifford Geertz's account of cockfighting in Bali illustrates this well (1993). Geertz found cockfighting to be an essential, pervasive element of Balinese society but it is apparent, however, that since cockfighting is 'play', he treats it as having no intrinsic worth, or relevance; it exists in a kind of bubble. He insists, in fact, that 'The cockfight is 'really real' only to the cocks - it does not kill anyone, castrate anyone, reduce anyone to animal status, alter the hierarchical relations among people...' (1993: 443). His attempt to reconcile this contradiction led him to interpret the cockfight in terms of a *text*, the reading of which may shed light on society: '...a story they tell themselves about themselves...' (1993: 448). At the same time, however, he makes it clear that his, and his wife's, participation in cockfighting, as observers, led to their being accepted more fully by the Balinese and this point, I would argue, provides an illustration of how play, in the form of the cockfight, was not only formed by society but also that it was also actively implicated in the *formation of society*.

Caillois' (1962) study is one of the last to attempt an overarching study of play *per se*, as an entity. Mihail Spariosu discussed play in terms of rational versus pre-rational thought – he identified a schism in western concepts of play whereby it paradoxically occupies both positions (1989). In general, there has been a tendency for researchers to examine examples of play as it occurs in its setting either individually or as a class. Brian Sutton-Smith has, furthermore, identified a tendency for studies of play to be split along disciplinary or academic lines, such as between anthropology, sociology,

psychology, education, child development and so on (1997). Sutton-Smith has also contributed his own list of play forms, which is slightly unusual in that his divisions are arranged in order from the mostly private to the mostly more public. His headings are: mind or subjective play; solitary play; playful behaviours; informal social play; vicarious audience play; performance play; celebrations and festivals; contests; risky or deep play. For Sutton-Smith, board games fall into 'contests' (Sutton-Smith 1997, 4-5), but it is clear that play is a vast, amorphous subject and that there is a great deal of debate over what, exactly, it really is.

Some types of play, including board games, have received relatively little attention, especially when compared to the ever burgeoning discipline of sports studies (see Loy & Kenyon 1969, Giulianotti 2004). Some areas of the world have attracted more attention than others from play scholars and it is difficult to say why this should be so other than a particular play form has caught the attention of passing anthropologists, perhaps because it has conveniently provided a contribution to some greater scheme of enquiry. One example might be Claude Lévi-Strauss and football (1966), or Trobriander Cricket (Weiner 1988). Japan currently seems to be a focus for attention in its own right (see papers in Hendry & Raveri 2002) and quite apart from the perceived oddness or otherwise of the Japanese at play, this may be due to a small number of anthropologists (Joy Hendry and Rupert Cox, for example) combining their own research interests in south east Asia with an interest in play, and in the process pulling in others to help develop the field further.

Archaeology and Play

There are many differences between archaeology and anthropology, even if they study essentially the same thing – people. For the purposes of this study I would characterise the difference in terms of movement: anthropology, for me, views things in motion, while archaeology is more static and must deal with the residue. Play, likewise, is a description of something in motion and here I have tried to bring some feeling for movement, or growth, back to the archaeology.

When it comes to archaeological literature generally there is little interest in play, unless it is part of wider discussions of childhood, or gender. Roberta Gilchrist, for example, firmly links miniature objects to children and to an engendering of individuals within society, though Joanna Derevenski is more cautious (Gilchrist 1999, 91, Derevenski 2000 and see also papers in Derevenski 2000a). The few exceptions are mostly confined to the classical world, or the Middle East. The 'Royal Game of Ur' (Becker 2007, Finkel 2007), for example, is an archaeological board game which has sparked imaginations. There is a small body of work on Mancala boards from North African sites (de Voogt 2012). Many Roman excavations have recovered gaming equipment; military installations in particular seem to yield large quantities of gaming material and there is a persistent trope of the lonely, bored, centurion whiling away his (it is always a 'he') long hours on watch by gambling or playing games with his companions.

In these accounts the games are always the unimportant activities which take place in between the real action, whether it be fighting off the natives or engaging in the far more important and worthy subsistence activities. Most archaeologists seem to (unconsciously) follow Groos or Nietzsche, I believe, in that the evidence for play is taken as the residue of childish, irrelevant activities. If there is one thing I hope to demonstrate in this study, however, it is the centrality of play to people's lives and how it can contribute to theories around the ways in which we interact with the world.

The closest that archaeologists' discussions come to *play*, with the sense of a subject which is bigger than mere *games* – Huizinga's 'ludic' – is probably when they deal with performance, or ritual. This is an interesting area, one where considerations of play, performance and ritual, archaeology and theatre, collide and intermingle (see Turner 1969, 1982 Schechner 2002, Pearson & Shanks 2001).

When archaeologists excavate a settlement they encounter the relations between the objects in a certain way – for example, even the best stratigraphic control cannot avoid a certain degree of foreshortening whereby numbers of objects which were used sequentially are recorded together as an assemblage (or bricolage); it is a problem I had to be wary of since it can lead to the accidental creation of sets (see chapter 4). The processes involved in museum storage and display creates more forms of this assemblage which can be difficult to disentangle; some museum displays actively encourage this kind of assemblage – the NMS prehistory displays in Chambers Street, Edinburgh are a very good example of this kind of foreshortened view because they deliberately juxtapose objects of widely different ages, in an attempt to present, for example, the evolution of pottery styles or the uses of worked bone.

Themes and Results of this study

'If it moves, salute it. If it doesn't move, pick it up. If you can't pick it up, paint it white' (Hutchins 1995, 7)

The results of this study fall into two main categories: those that relate more directly to the ostensible anthropological or archaeological subject matter of the study, and those which are more general. The general points are mostly cognitive and reflect my own interests to some extent; they revolve around the relationship between people and things, or objects. I noted above that I found chess players difficult to study because they talked so little, however they were in reality communicating a great deal, only they were using objects – the chess pieces – to do this. The same is true of euchre, and any board game. I was thus led by the anthropology towards a kind of cognitive study which took account of peoples' relationships with objects. The quote from Edwin Hutchins above sums up cognition quite well, I think. Hutchins is here restating a naval maxim but I like it because many of the problems identified by the theorists can be seen as revolving around these three entities: people, objects and the world. My study concerns all three, but it begins with the objects.

In archaeological terms, I was able to trace the first solid evidence for play in my study area from early in the 1 millennium AD onwards. This evidence begins with a limited repertoire of simple games using counters and gradually becomes more complex and more varied over time. By the end of the millennium, or soon after (Eales 2007), chess had arrived, in Europe at least, and is one of a group of board games such as merrels and alquerque (see Murray 1952, Hall 2007, Ritchie 2008) being played at all levels of society. One of the most interesting findings, for myself, has been how very widespread some of these games are. The earliest forms of game which I identified, counters and parallelopiped dice, most probably ultimately derive from contact with the Roman world much further to the south; these objects represent specific kinds of activity which should probably be included as part of the evidence for contact between Atlantic Scotland and ‘Rome’ together with the other more usual objects: amphora, coins, samian, metalwork etc. In the case of Tafl, the literary evidence demonstrates that it and its variants were played from the very north of Scandinavia southwards as far as Ireland, Wales and England. It even seems to have been incorporated as part of religious or cult activities (Page 1995, 206-207). The presence of this game in Atlantic Scotland is surely an indication of contact between here and Scandinavia at an early date, prior to the usually accepted (late 8 Century) date for Viking activity. It is an indication of the nature of these early contacts and must support Anna Ritchie’s long-debated results from her excavations at Buckquoy (Ritchie 1977, Crawford 1987, 139-141), where she posited a degree of much more peaceful contact between native and ‘Viking’ than is sometimes assumed.

I have always enjoyed handling archaeological *things* — it is for me a definite plus when I am excavating on site and encounter an artefact — there is much that can be learned about an object when one can hold it and examine it in one’s own hands; it is a process of discovery. It is not the same when I view objects on display in a museum, which are usually behind glass and cannot be touched and explored in the same way, but one of the pleasures of this study was the opportunity to look at objects which are held in museum stores. The Clickhimin material, for example, was held in a motley group of old tin boxes and cases which had not been opened for many years, probably since the excavation over fifty years previously. The objects have never been properly catalogued and so I never knew what exactly would come out next. It was this kind of interaction which brought home to me the importance of the object itself — its weight and size and also the material it is made of. I found that gaming pieces are made from a bewildering variety of materials: they can be made from animal bone, or pieces of reused pottery, some are shiny glass, others just waterworn pebbles. The most interesting ones for me were not the very fine or carefully made ones but the simple ones, for example the stones which had been plucked from the players’ surrounding environment and pressed into service, perhaps only for the duration of one game, or cattle bones (phalanges) which had been modified only enough to allow them to stand upright.

Bricolage

It became clear to me that sets of gaming pieces are not always composed of identical pieces and that the process of play brought together objects which could be quite varied; this led me to a consideration of play, sets and bricolage (see chapters 4 and 6). I begin with Lévi-Strauss (1966), however he was concerned with a bricolage of the mind and thought (there are also many objections to his approach, see Ingold 2007), and my bricolage is of things, of objects. The juxtaposition of objects leads, I argue, to fresh ways of thinking, ways which cannot be entirely predicted before the objects are physically together, out there, in front of the player. I witnessed this process many times during games of chess. For a game which seems to be so cerebral, it is not always done in the head – players spend much of their time manipulating the pieces, moving one piece then taking it back and moving another. They do this to ‘see how it looks’ because even very good players find they cannot always understand a position fully if they cannot see the board in front of them, with the pieces in place. The exact location, or placement, of the pieces is therefore also important.

Placement

I found this to be true of chess and euchre but I also could trace this in the archaeology. In chapter 6 I looked at board games in the last part of the 1 millennium AD, and I did consider the placement of things in house interiors as ludic (there was also the attraction of the excavation technique of gridding the interior as a chess board), but there have been very few excavations in Atlantic Scotland which have recorded the data with the necessary detail and I would have been forced to take several steps backwards into the Neolithic before I could find the information – the ongoing excavations at Links of Noltland in Orkney are a rare example (Moore & Wilson 2011). In the end, the best examples, I believe, would be something like graves and I used the boat burial at Scar, in Orkney (see chapter 6). This did contain a set of Tafl gaming pieces (most likely the variant known as ‘hnefetafl’) but I widened my interpretation to include the entire site as a form of game, where the grave itself acted as a kind of board, lending meaning to the placement of people and objects within it. A game, of course, is active, and it is this sense of movement which animates it, gives it direction and a sense of narrative, yet the grave is also active while it is being created and there are many cases where the grave goods and bodies are manipulated and rearranged repeatedly, even after some time has passed (for example, Neolithic chambered tombs) and the grave has apparently been refilled and closed (Ucko 1969, Parker Pearson 1999. Mike Parker-Pearson’s recent excavations at Cladh Hallan in South Uist have also demonstrated this aspect of burial); one of my arguments is that this is fundamentally playful or ludic.

David Kirsh (1995) has emphasised the importance of context and the relevance of the spatial distribution of things in space: space is not passive but part of cognition. This is also relevant to play, firstly, directly, in the sense that games like chess

depend on a board to provide a quantifiable space against which the play unfolds and which helps to provide meaning, but also, indirectly, in the sense that all play takes place within a ‘backdrop’ whereby the activity as a whole is given meaning, even if it is transitory and self-referential. The school hall where we played euchre, for example, and the people taking part and helping with the tea and sandwiches, are all implicated here.

Extended Cognition

I find the relationship between players, gaming pieces and the board or playing surface very interesting. One implication of the way chess and euchre players use objects, whether cards or pieces, is that cognition is not contained, but distributed – my reason for stating this is that the players repeatedly used the gaming pieces to help them work out what to do; it was never the case that the disposition of pieces on the board simply reflected some internal model held in the players’ minds but that the players worked with them in skilful ways, continually moving them, discovering new or unexpected connections as they did so. These discoveries then fed the next round of decision making. This is, I believe, ‘active externalism’ in practice (see Menary 2010). Clark and Chalmers’ oft-quoted principle is relevant here:

‘If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which, were it done in the head, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world *is* (so we claim) part of the cognitive process. Cognitive processes ain’t (all) in the head!’ (Clark and Chalmers 2010, 29)

Clark and Chalmers stated their case simply and convincingly; their theory can also be seen in the light of the movement away from the ‘Cartesian’ perspective, where cognition is understood to be locked inside the head, towards one where the environment is acknowledged as playing a significant role in mental operations including learning (Vygotsky 1978), navigation (Hutchins 1995) and the ascription of agency (Gell 1998), among others. For archaeologists like Colin Renfrew (2004) and Lambros Malafouris (2013), Merlin Donald’s concept of ‘external symbolic storage’ (Donald 1991) has been particularly influential. For Renfrew, ‘the symbol cannot exist without the substance’ (2004, 25). Steven Mithen (1996) has also taken an interest, although the archaeologists’ perspective is often an evolutionary one, more concerned with mental hard wiring than with ecological cognition as in the approach of Clark and Chalmers. If a criticism could be levelled at the more archaeological side of the debate, it is that it takes quite a static view of human– object interaction; it is more interested in objects as repositories for memory, and in that sense has simply shifted the field of operations out of the mind and onto the environment without accounting for the necessary interaction between the two. Malafouris is, I believe, a good recent exemplar of this kind of approach: his account invariably seems to draw on past instances of writing and counting with the material world (Malafouris 2013,

see also Hutchins 1995, 369 for a similar view of earlier theorists). Hodder has taken a more nuanced approach, seeking to account for human/thing, thing/thing, thing/human and human/human relations via a sense of ‘entanglement’ (Hodder 2012, 88).

Agency and Play

Much of the debate around cognition has focussed on person/object relations, particularly the vexed question of whether objects can be understood to possess agency in the same way that humans do. Gell (1998), for example, is happy to treat objects as possessors of agency, even if of a secondary kind. Latour (1999) prefers to attribute agency neither to persons nor to objects, but rather to the compounds or ‘actor-networks’ that are formed when persons and objects interact. Tim Ingold has taken issue with Latour’s so-called Actor Network Theory, and indeed with the concept of agency in general, insofar as it treats actions as the effects of an agentive cause. For Ingold, persons and things are possessed by action, and their ‘lines of life, growth and movement’ are entangled to form what he calls a meshwork (Ingold 2011, 63). Ingold sidesteps the problem of agency by seeking to follow the flow of materials (Ingold 2011, 16-17) instead of becoming caught up in an obsession with the ‘materiality of objects’. For Ingold, the question of agency is a red herring: the surfaces between things are the real sites of interest (Ingold 2011, 30-31). For my part I have avoided attributing agency to gaming pieces, seeking instead to talk of action by proxy (Chapters 2 and 6).

Awkward Objects

I encountered a confusion between materials and materiality (as described by Ingold) in my search for archaeological examples of play (chapter 7). Here, I describe the difficulty of recognising play in the archaeological record, and provide some examples of awkward objects, the things I could not say for certain were play-related, but which might have been. I divided these objects into groups. Some had no conceivable purpose and had not been modified but could be shown to have been brought into the realm of human activity – were they used in a game? Others had been altered in some way, but again had no known purpose. Miniature things – tiny battle axes, or quern stones – also seemed to be play-like, and some obviously utilitarian objects, a stone tool, for example, might have been recovered as part of a set (also known as a ‘hoard’, see Chapman 2000, 105-131, Bradley 1998), have been used together with other parts of an assemblage, have been involved with cognitive processes, and to have been deposited in a ritual manner, much as the kinds of material objects more usually associated with play, i.e. gaming pieces, can be.

A quality that many of these objects shared was *surface treatment*: quartzite pebbles had designs applied in lamp black, or a slab of stone was covered with small circles, and the effect is confusion: the surface treatment has obscured the relationship between material and materiality.

Play and the world

This study has led me to the conclusion that play is not as set apart as Huizinga claimed. In the case of euchre, I could see many ways in which this game has close links to the island community where it is played, in the sense that it is part of a Westray way of dealing with life; from this perspective it is difficult to draw a firm line dividing play from life. One of the striking elements, for me, of the archaeological evidence was the way in which everyday objects like stones or fragments of pottery were pressed into service as playthings before being abandoned and allowed to quickly become part of the background once more. I could also see how an interest in placement — an essential part of board games — could be broadened out to include, for example, an entire grave with all of its constituent parts. This has led me to see play and games not as set apart so much as simplified, or very clear, examples of the ways we get on with the world.

In moving around things, and in moving things around we constantly encounter the new. In particular, we are made aware of *space* in ways we can not predict (Sutton-Smith 1997, 87). We discover new relationships between things and between ourselves and the things, and we could not have made these discoveries if we did not engage with the objects. It is not enough to imagine the world or to hold objects such as gaming pieces in the mind: even the small number of pieces on a chess board encapsulate too much complexity. This is obvious when we look at play, and the way people play board games like chess encapsulate it perfectly.

Finally, if there is an overall theme here it concerns the relationship between play, objects and people. I no longer see play as set apart as some have theorised, and the ways in which people make use of objects for play now seem to me to be no more than particular examples of something more general. The ways that people use objects during play; the ways they are manipulated, used as proxies, thought with; the ways that people pay attention to the relationships between objects, and manipulate these relationships, can be found everywhere in daily life.