

# **Play: the creation of culture and the modern world.**

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### **Abstract**

#### **Play in Academic Work**

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On the ground floor of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo there stands an impressive life-size statue of Pharaoh Ramses III, flanked by the gods Horus (personifying order) and Set (representing anarchy). The message – in common with the placards of the protesters outside the museum in Tahrir Square – is an unmistakably political one, but the statue serves to assert the divine right of kings rather than to demand democratic reforms. What gives the pharaoh his power is his appropriation not only of the orderly, structured and serious qualities of Horus, but also of the anarchic, chaotic and playful characteristics of Set. This ancient insight is a precursor to Huizinga's (1938) contention that man is a playful creature – *Homo ludens*.

To play is not merely to be frivolous, but to honour an essential part of our humanity. All work and no play not only makes Jack a dull boy, it deprives him of the opportunities that play offers to enhance his work. In many occupations, the play element simply provides an antidote to the tedium of the work proper and allows the worker to return to the task refreshed and re-energised, but in some professions play is an intrinsic aspect of carrying out the work itself to the highest standards. Since I am addressing an audience of scholars and academics here today, I shall take the work of the academic as an example of this.

There are parts of academic work that are largely in Horus' domain, requiring a serious and orderly approach: budgeting and attending examination boards, for example. The finance department would not be amused by a whimsical purchase, nor would it be fair to candidates to be playful when discussing the class of degree they ought to be awarded. Important as these activities are, however, they can be regarded as somewhat peripheral, since they are not directly related to the academic's central task of generating and disseminating knowledge. It is in this knowledge-juggling (not information-processing) work that Set's playfulness is indispensable.

In Plato's accounts of Socrates' dialogues with his interlocutors, time after time we see the acquisition of knowledge concerned with serious matters being mediated through intellectual play: irony, *elenchus*, mischief-making, self-deprecation, wit, word-play, irreverence and irrelevance. These are still common in the modern academic's informal discursive repertoire, and we should not be ashamed of using such playfulness, both for its own sake and to further our epistemic mission. There is a modernist tendency to place all rational activity in Horus' hands, and we all feel the effects of this in academia: an emphasis on outcomes, relevance, impact and efficiency. Such an empowering of the technical rationalist, who, 'smiling into his beard', mocks and undermines intellectual playfulness, impoverishes the work of the genuine academic. Like the pharaoh, however, the academic knows that both Horus and Set are allies in the search for truth. Intellectual work needs both order and play.