"ALL SHOOK UP" AT THE PARKES ELVIS FESTIVAL:
THE ROLE OF PLAY IN EVENTS

PAUL T. JONSON, JENNIE SMALL, CARMEL FOLEY, AND KATIE SCHLENKER

Business School, University of Technology Sydney, Broadway NSW, Australia

Leisure in the postmodern environment is often regarded as superficial, depthless, and meaningless, dominated by simulation and hyperreality. Many aspects of the Parkes Elvis Festival fall clearly into the category of simulation and hyperreality as attendees imitate Elvis Presley (and other associated characters) and are willing to accept the fake and contrived as real. However, the simulation does not, in the case of the Parkes Elvis Festival, lead to a depthless, meaningless, or inauthentic experience. Using Huizinga's ideas of play and Bateson's *play frame* we present the Elvis Festival as a liminal social space that invites playfulness and creativity. The theory of Georg Simmel is explored to show how sociability is created at the event to facilitate play. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi's theory of *flow* is used to demonstrate ways in which the enjoyment of the playful event experience is maximized for participants. We argue that *play* provides the substance that makes the Parkes Elvis Festival memorable and meaningful. An understanding of play theory may assist event managers to increase social facilitation at festivals and events, ensuring an enjoyable, sociable, creative, and authentic experience for attendees.

Key words: Postmodernity; Play; Play frame; Sociability; Flow; Event management

Introduction

Every year since 1993 thousands of people have increasingly flocked to the central western New South Wales town of Parkes for the annual Elvis Festival. This event has grown into one of the major highlights of the Australian summer. Its success, we argue, is due to the playful, sociable, and enjoyable environment that the event managers and participants create and sustain.

In the postmodern environment, leisure activity—of which an event is typically a manifestation—is said to be hyperreal, simulated, and depthless (Rojek, 1995), lacking significance, memorability, or ongoing attraction. As this is potentially fatal for an event, an antidote or additional element is required to give the event dynamism and substance. It is proposed the ingredient to ensure event dynamism is *play* or the "invitation to play" (Foley, Edwards, & Schlenker, 2014, p. 60) as leisure events

are social spaces in which play is often encouraged. Furthermore, events, by definition, are *out of the ordinary* experiences (Getz, 2012). Significantly, *out of the ordinary* is also a fundamental characteristic of the play experience (Huizinga, 1980). This article will argue that *play* can provide substance to events that will ensure the event is memorable and meaningful.

In view of the definitional connections between events and play, it is surprising that the event literature makes so few references to the concept of *play* or to the related concepts of *sociability* and *flow.* In an overview of the nexus of leisure and event studies, Patterson and Getz (2013) discuss the concept of *liminality*, which is described as a state of social limbo during which participants *play* with elements of culture, and note that events can be defined as liminoid experiences. In a study of the sociable legacies of business events, Foley et al. (2014) recognize that people are drawn to events by the expectation that they are going to have some fun. They draw on play theory (Huizinga, 1980; Simmel, 1964; Wearing, 1998) and play's associations with *social bonds* and *creativity* to elucidate their findings that business events spark both friendships and innovation. In the context of sport events, Giulianotti (2005) deploys Simmel's (1964) concept of sociability to develop a sociological analysis of the *Tartan Army* of supporters that travels to Scotland football matches. Giulianotti (2005) contends that the "Tartan Army may be understood as an institution that affords regular sociable escape from the anomic individuation of modern culture, into a form of public life where no one is alone in the crowd" (p. 302). Patterson and Getz (2013) argue that the field of event studies has been preoccupied with event management and business studies. Similarly, Andrews and Leopold (2013) argue that the business elements of events have been overprivileged in the studies of events, to date, at the expense of sociocultural aspects. Play theory provides an alternative perspective through which we can increase our understanding of events and offers another contribution to the emerging, multidisciplinary field of event studies.

This article commences with a brief historical review of modernity and leisure in modernity including the role of the rational recreation movement (Bailey, 1978). It outlines the changes to the social and cultural environment in the postmodern world and, in particular, the nature of leisure and hence events (Rojek, 1995). Using Huizinga's (1980) ideas of play and Bateson's (1973) *play frame* we present an understanding of leisure events as liminal social spaces that invite playfulness and creativity, which thereby contribute to human and societal growth and culture.

The theory of Georg Simmel (1964) is explored and illustrated to show how sociability can be created for an event to facilitate play. Finally, Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory of *flow* is outlined to show how the maximum enjoyable, playful event experience can be achieved for the participants.

An understanding of the above theories can contribute to our comprehension of the sustained success of the annual Parkes Elvis Festival. A deeper understanding of the meaning of play will enhance the ability of the event manager to increase social facilitation for attendees at this and other similar events. The article makes a contribution then to both event management and event studies. In the current postmodern environment, it is vital that the play element is brought into events to ensure they are creative and meaningful. In turn, this will contribute to self-development and satisfying experiences for those attending, which will lead to cherished and desired events.

Sociohistorical Context

Modernity

To understand the postmodern world it is helpful to understand the modern world out of which postmodernity emerged.

The historical period known as modernity (1750–1950) is that period in Western societies when industrialization and capitalism dominated economic and social interactions in the context of the protestant work ethic (Weber, 1976). That is, the owners of capital—land, factories, mines, and machines—with their focus on surplus and profit, utilized the religious and social environment that encouraged and centralized hard work, self-discipline, and frugality as the core orientations for a good life and an even better afterlife. Industrialization and the proliferation of the clock meant workers were organized in their daily and weekly schedules (Thompson, 1967). Life was urbanized, organized, compartmentalized (work,

rest, and leisure), and regimented. It was the *brave new world* in which the machine would take over and lead to a life of leisure. This side of modernity celebrated the triumphs of science, art, technology, economics, and politics (Mackie, 1996). Similarly, leisure in modernity was order and control characterized by the emergence of rational recreation (Bailey, 1978). This was the period in which many of our current sports developed and mass tourism as a leisure pursuit began. Sport was encouraged to ensure a healthy body and behavior—the notion of *muscular Christianity* (Bailey, 1978; Kidd, 2013). Thomas Cook organized his rail journeys as a temperance crusade. Leisure in this vein was presented as fulfilling and enriching. It was that free space, that free time away from work and other duties that allowed self-realization.

However, these triumphs of modernity inherently promised change and in doing so generated another side to modernity—feelings of doubt, skepticism, and pessimism about the existing order, a sense of turmoil, constant change: "new rhythms and currents in social life associated with industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of 'the society of spectacle'" (Rojek, 1995, p. 5).

On the other side, leisure in modernity was disorder and fragmentation; restlessness and uncertainty. Leisure in this vein was a time for distraction and escape at the music hall, the ale house, and the gambling den. Leisure activity was used for filling in time through consumption. It presented as a series of fleeting relationships that produced boredom, frustration, nervousness, as well as excitement, stimulation, and pleasure (Rojek, 1995). The notion of leisure as a means of self-improvement is, in this scenario, treated with cynicism.

Given this context of necessary change, there was an inevitable decline of modernity. In short, modernism, in the first sense, set itself targets—a utopia—which it was unable to achieve. Hence, "postmodernism sprang from the vivid failure of modernist thought (and society) to manage order or implement change by the lights of its own ambition" (Rojek, 1995, p. 170).

Postmodernity

The decline of modernity in effect was a loss of confidence in the social and political structures and the ideology that supported them. There was no longer any faith or confidence in grand theories or indeed any theories or system which suggested universal truth and progress**.** There was therefore a destabilization of the elitist authority and power structures of modernity (Rojek, 1995). Similarly, leisure in postmodern society is no longer segmented from the rest of life as a charmed realm of self-fulfillment and life satisfaction. The modernist convention of treating work as the central life interest of normal people and the foundation of society is challenged (Rojek 1995). In the postmodern world, life is seen as contingent and uncertain. Hence, leisure becomes a matter of faddism, of hopping from one activity to another, and then to another. Leisure is mere consumption, market directed.

A prominent feature of leisure in the postmodern world is simulation: all those processes and objects that are designed to duplicate, imitate, or extend original objects and processes. The dream world has replaced the real world. Those living in postmodern society are happy to accept the fake and contrived as real. Simulated realities have become as real as the historical reality of the situated activities of real people. In this scenario we are said to have entered a society of hyperreality: a condition in which mechanical and electronic forms of simulation generally problematize the relation between truth and fiction, reality and myth (Rojek, 1995). Leisure experience becomes dominated by spectacle and sensation. In this environment each leisure selection that the individual makes will seem to be merely arbitrary from the flux of possible leisure options. We no longer seek the authentic experience.

Leisure in the postmodern environment is therefore characterized by superficiality, depthlessness, and meaninglessness. We are less focused on the leisure experience as personally edifying. Rather, leisure takes its place in the economy of the sign as offering us opportunities to construct and reconstruct ourselves (identity) and social position.

We argue that in this postmodern context *play* encompassing *sociability* and *enjoyment* (as flow experience) is the sustaining element that provides meaning in leisure and therefore an antidote to the malaise of postmodern leisure. If leisure events encompass play they will be enjoyable, creative, and memorable experiences that will contribute to emotional growth and self-development.

Play

Play, often associated with children, is also engaged in by adults. In its social interactive form play is universal, pleasurable, and transportable and involves stepping away from the "literal, mundane, everyday-life world" (Veal, Darcy, & Lynch, 2013, p. 19).

Homo Ludens: Huizinga

According to Huizinga (1980), our relationship with play comes from a deep part of the human psyche and predates even language. Huizinga (1980), in his seminal work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, drew together the ideas that constitute play. Play is free activity standing quite consciously outside of ordinary life as being *not serious*, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely. Play is an activity connected with no ulterior motive —play is for play's sake. It proceeds within its own boundaries of time and space according to its own rules. Finally, play promotes the formation of social groupings, which tend to persist even when the play is over (Huizinga, 1980).

Huizinga's (1980) constituents of play were, in effect, expanded by Gregory Bateson through placing play into a psychological framework.

The Play Frame: Bateson

Gregory Bateson (1973) in his examination of play and fantasy stresses the importance of multiple and competing layers of communication, the generation of a playful, logical paradox, and the creation of a psychological context or frame within which special meanings of play are created and communicated. Bateson (1973) argues that when we enter play activity we adopt a different psychological perspective—he says we enter the "play frame." While in this play frame—for example, when we play sport, go to a movie, listen to a joke, or attend an event—we treat the activities as real in the sense of serious, but at the same time we know that they are not real in the sense that they are just playful experiences. Bateson described this as the "paradox of play" and he argued that all play frames contain this paradox (p. 162). It is fun and serious, pretend and not pretend *at the same time* and the paradox

ends when the play frame is broken, when the play episode comes to an end. But before that, the players can joke and be in a fantasy-like world—knowing it is play and also real life at the same time.

In addition to Bateson's "play frame," Georg Simmel's concept of "sociability" is useful to an understanding of play.

Sociability: Simmel

Simmel (1964) was a German sociologist who was a keen observer and analyst of modernity. Simmel asked the question: how is society possible? Simmel was of the view that society exists through many different forms of interaction. Buyer and seller come together in a situation of exchange; student and teacher come together in a form of association called education. Manager and participant come together in events. There is a fixed regular pattern of association—and this is what Simmel called *form*. Society for Simmel was the sum total of all the forms of association.

Further for Simmel (1964), each form has its particular *content*. Contents for Simmel were the different interests, motivations, and drives within an individual (which will vary with each individual over time) and these drives push individuals into association with other people. With form and content basic to his theory of society, Simmel singled out one special form of association as being the pure form of association, and it was pure because the contents (the drives that brought the people together) fell away, the motive evaporated so that it was only form. That is, people associated for the sake of association and satisfaction derived simply from being with the other person. So for Simmel (1964) there is pure play when we take away any ulterior motives and people play just for the sake of playing. He called this pure play *sociability*.

Sociability is accomplished through several steps and strategies. Simmel (1964) suggested each person has objective characteristics recognized in the outside world such as status, occupation, wealth, income, and education, which one carries with one wherever one goes. People also have subjective characteristics—our psyche, our deep and personal moods. Simmel theorized that for people to attain the pure form of association these objective and subjective characteristics must be cast aside so that people

are temporarily free, detached—or seemingly so. It is in a sense an artificial environment or a *pretend* world. An individual must act as if she or he does not have any of these extraneous characteristics because if they did have them then there is a likelihood of conflict or dissonance. Furthermore, through casting aside these objective and subjective characteristics, a temporary equality is created—people are seemingly free and equal together. That is, in this ideal world of play we have freedom and equality side by side for that moment (Simmel, 1964).

For sociability to happen, it is vital that a number of rules are observed. As already indicated, individuals must act as if they are equals, not assume some superior or inferior position. They must exercise tact in their interactions by not saying or doing something that would distress the others in the interaction. The basic principle of democracy must be present—each person must have as much freedom to participate as is consonant with the other person having that freedom. Finally, the interaction (typically conversation) must be "gripping," otherwise it will sink (Foley et al., 2014, p. 59). Significantly then, sociability or "play" does not just happen, it requires thought and positive actions. If play becomes this ideal form it is only temporary.

This moment of sociability may also be understood as what the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1975) described as the experience of "flow."

Flow: Csikszentmihalyi

In his seminal work *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) focuses attention on people who have had peak experiences, who are intrinsically motivated, and who are involved in play as well as "real life" activities (chess players as well as surgeons). His study is of the "peculiar dynamic state—the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (p. 36). This state he designates as *flow* where "action follows upon action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention by the actor" (p. 36). This experience of flow can therefore be regarded as play if one looks at the features of play as analyzed by Huizinga (1980). Importantly, this experience of flow or play is characterized by enjoyment, which is regarded by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as more complex than pleasurableness,

which is merely the satisfaction of basic needs and is not enough to give a sense of fulfillment. Pleasurableness is characteristic then of postmodernity. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) argues one needs to grow, to develop new skills, to take on new challenges in order to maintain a self–concept as a fully functioning human being—in short, one needs to play. Enjoyment from such play is then a "feeling of creative discovery, a challenge overcome, a difficulty resolved" (p. 181).

Based on his research, flow is analyzed by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) to have six elements. Firstly, in the flow state there is "the merging of action and awareness. A person in flow has no dualistic perspective: aware of (one's) actions but not of the awareness itself" (p. 38). Secondly, there is "a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field"—those things necessary for the activity (p. 40). Thirdly, when this occurs there is a " 'loss of ego,' 'self-forgetfulness,' and 'a loss of consciousness' " about what one is doing (p. 42). Fourthly, there is "no active awareness" of being in or out of control (p. 44). Fifthly there are "clear, coherent, non-contradictory demands for action and . . . clear unambiguous feedback to a person's actions" (p. 46). Sixthly, the experience is " 'autotelic' . . . it appears to need no goals or external rewards" (p. 47). These factors can be compared with those of Huizinga (1980) and Bateson (1973) outlined above.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) asks: how do some activities make possible the experience of flow? He answers the "state of flow is felt when opportunities for action are in balance with the actor's skills (or, when challenges are in balance with the action capabilities)" (p. 49). Notably, whether one is in flow or not depends on one's perceptions of the challenges and skills.

Skills are a person's capacities to cope with the demands imposed by the environment and include technical competence and emotional, managerial, and cognitive abilities required to structure the stimulus field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Challenges are described as "opportunities for action" (p. 49). Perception is equated with interpretation and it assumes that individuals interpret and shape their own definitions of objects, actions, and situations. Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) theory then works as follows: Flow will be experienced whenever a person acting in a situation perceives his or her

skills to be in balance with the perceived challenges of the situation. Flow is thus a state of mind that is generated by a conscious effort and therefore is very action based. Hence, Csikszentmihalyi importantly returns attention to the subjective experience of the player. In so doing, he illuminates the way in which people come to feel a sense of control over their environment and themselves. The ability to achieve flow is in part dependent on the ability to control the environment, which comes through limiting the stimulus field; finding clear goals and norms; and developing appropriate skills. Flow—playful enjoyable experience—does not just happen; it too requires thought, effort, and skill. In the context of a music festival this might involve getting into a flow state by limiting the stimulus field to a particular performance, being clear about the goals and norms of participating in the festival, and developing the skills required to do so—these might be around dancing, crowd surfing, moshing, and the like. In the specific context of the Parkes Elvis Festival it would involve becoming aware of the history of Elvis—his songs, his movies, his characteristic mannerisms and sayings, and his general iconic status in popular culture.

Play and Creativity

For Huizinga (1980), enjoyment or what he calls the "fun-element [is the thing] that characterizes the essence of play" (p. 3) and "genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization" (p. 5). If we did not play, be it at work or at leisure, then there could be no progress in any endeavor. Without play, cultures would cease to develop and might become rather stagnant.

Bateson (1973) too noted that play underpinned the development of civilization. "Without these paradoxes of play the evolution of communication would be at an end. Life would be an endless interchange of stylized messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change or humour" (p. 166).

As Rojek (1995), when considering Huizinga (1980), says "play is the origin of culture and the foundation of human association and practice" (p. 186). This is because play contains a creative element. Play opens the way for experimentation—because it is real and not real, pretend and not pretend at the same time—and allows novel forms of

behavior to be tested. Play "can enable an individual to acquire an awareness of the self as a cause of activity which invites transgression of conventional restraints, thus creating time and space out of structure where new social arrangements can be experimented with" (Wearing, 1998, p. 40). In essence, the playful paradox sparks creativity. Playful communication enhances relationships and social change.

Thus, play (as described by Huizinga, 1980) is achieved by entering the play frame (Bateson, 1973), which one does through the sociological steps and work to attain sociability (Simmel, 1964), which would include the personal individual psychological perception of challenges and skills in balance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The outcome: meaningful experience that is remembered, cherished, desired; in which participants will grow and develop socially and emotionally (Bateson, 1973; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Huizinga, 1980). This is the event experience par excellence.

Through application of the above-mentioned theories to the annual Parkes Elvis Festival, this article demonstrates that *play* provides the substance that makes the event memorable and meaningful, and on which its sustained success has been built.

The Parkes Elvis Festival

The Parkes Elvis Festival is a celebration of the life, music, and culture of the late Elvis Presley. Established in 1993 and held annually in the Australian town of Parkes each January, the festival is timed to coincide with Elvis Presley's birthday. Parkes is located 365 km west of Sydney and has a population of approximately 12,000 people. While Parkes has historically been associated with its radio telescope (made famous by the Australian movie *The Dish* released in 2000), with the growing success of the Elvis Festival, Parkes has become widely recognized as the "Elvis Capital of Australia." From humble origins the festival now sees up to 15,000 Elvis fans descend on Parkes each January.

The festival program, growing each year, now runs for 5 days, with over 150 individual events held from Wednesday through to Sunday. The program includes the headline Feature Concerts Series with renowned Elvis impersonators, the Elvis Gospel Church Service that celebrates Elvis' roots in the gospel genre, free entertainment in the park, and popular

events including a mass renewal of wedding vows with an Elvis celebrant, the Miss Priscilla Dinner and Big Hair Competition, and the Elvis Street Parade.

The Elvis Express train service that travels between Sydney and Parkes is an annual highlight for festival visitors. Over 400 passengers begin their Elvis Festival experience before even arriving in Parkes. Leaving Sydney on the Thursday of the festival, rock 'n' roll singers and dancers firstly entertain passengers on the platform at Sydney's Central Station. On board, staff members are in costume and passengers are entertained by Elvis tribute artists. There are prizes for best-dressed passengers and a grand platform welcome reception awaits in Parkes, including a welcome from "Mayor Elvis."

During this unique event, Parkes experiences an "all things Elvis" makeover. There are Elvises of all shapes and forms throughout the streets and in local shops, and plenty of opportunities for photos with an Elvis, Priscilla (his wife), or even Lisa-Marie (his daughter). The town center comes alive during the festival, with buskers lining the streets and local businesses taking part in the playfulness of the event. Throughout the festival there are numerous roles for visitors to play, from spectator to active attendee. We argue that the active participation of the majority of visitors to the Parkes Elvis Festival is central to the event's playful nature. The event is different to many other music events that feature a lineup of different performers. Instead, at the Parkes Elvis Festival, not only is the focus on just one performer, but also, that performer has been dead for almost 40 years.

Research Methods

The methodology for the gathering and analyzing of the subject data of this research included both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Initially a questionnaire survey of participants at the Parkes Elvis Festival was conducted and the results of this survey prompted further research into the play aspects of the festival through a memory work study (Haug, 1987).

Questionnaire Survey

The 2010 Parkes Elvis Festival ran from Wednesday, January 6 to Sunday, January 10. A questionnaire-based survey of festival attendees was conducted by a research team of five people on the afternoon and evening of January 8, and morning, afternoon, and evening of January 9 and 10. The aim of the questionnaire was to establish a profile of the attendees. A three-page written (i.e., paper) survey instrument gathered basic visitation data, travel characteristics, demographics, marketing information, motivations for attendance, satisfaction, and expenditure data necessary to calculate the inscope expenditure resulting from the event. Random sampling was achieved by assigning researchers to different zones to ensure all event sites were covered, and a *next person past* method was used to approach respondents. That is, when one interview was finished and the questionnaire had been checked for completeness, the interviewer approached the next person to pass them (Veal, 2011). Over the 3-day period, 371 attendees completed the survey. SPSS predictive analytics software was used to analyze the data, with both descriptive and analytical statistics employed in data interpretation.

It was the quantitative finding on "play" being the most popular motivation for attending the Parkes Elvis Festival that prompted further investigation into the play experience using a memory work study (Haug, 1987).

Memory Work Study

As discussed by critical theorists (Small, 1999; Small, Harris, Wilson, & Ateljevic, 2011), research data are produced from within a sociocultural context and the researcher is part of this context. Both during and following the event we, as researchers, commented on our enjoyment of the event and its playful nature and tried to make sense of our experiences. Clearly, we researchers were more than objective "data gatherers." We had been moved and surprised by our emotions from this out of the ordinary data collection experience. We felt we too were part of the collective of "event participants," sharing the experience with others and contributing to the physical and sociocultural landscape of the event.

The purpose of this stage of the research process was to explore the *researchers'* understandings of their personal experiences of play at the Festival and thus contribute to an understanding of the experiences of other event attendees. The selected

method was memory work (Haug, 1987), a social constructionist feminist method that explores the social, shared meaning of life experiences. The underlying theory of memory work is that "subjectively significant events, events which are remembered, and the way they are subsequently constructed, play an important part in the construction of self" (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992, p. 37). Because the theory considers that the self is socially constructed through reflection, memories are the data. The focus of the present study was memories of play at the Parkes Elvis Festival. Because the method considers that one is an expert in one's own experiences, the barriers between the subject and the object of research are broken down.

There are three phases to the method.

- *Phase 1*: The participants write a memory according to a set of rules (write in the third person, in as much detail as possible, and without interpretation). Participants are presented with a "trigger" for their memories. In this case the trigger was "Play at the Parkes Elvis Festival."
- *Phase 2*: The participants convene, read the memories, and discuss, drawing out their shared social understandings and identifying themes. In this case we discussed in relation to the academic theories on play with which we are familiar.
- *Phase 3*: The writing up of the findings.

The four researchers were Australian, white, middle class, and able-bodied women. Three of the researchers were tourism/events academics and one was a psychologist/academic. At the time of the festival we were aged from 20s to 50s. We were all familiar with Elvis Presley, some more so than others. None of us had attended an Elvis Festival before or were likely to have done so except for the current project.

As researchers, we had an academic purpose in being there—which gave us permission to be at an event that we would not have chosen to visit. This role gave our experience an added dimension as we were able to meet and speak with many of the attendees. It was an out of an ordinary research experience as interviewees were generally very interested and happy to participate in the interview.

The following findings emerge from one particular Parkes Elvis Festival and may well be influenced by the conditions at that time, not only factors related to the festival but our own personal situation at that time and the dynamics within the researcher group. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain the anonymity of the research group participants.

The Parkes Elvis Festival: Findings and Discussion

Questionnaire Survey

Of the respondents, 64% were female and 57% were aged 55 years or over. The majority of respondents (70%) were visitors to Parkes from other parts of New South Wales; local residents accounted for 16% of respondents; and the remaining 14% of respondents comprised interstate and international visitors.

Key to this research was the results of the question on motivations for attending the event (See Fig. 1). "To play and have fun" was the highest ranked motivation for attending the event cited by festival attendees, with a mean score of 8.52 out of 10. "The music/entertainment" was fractionally behind at 8.51, followed by "To escape from the everyday routine" (8.00), "to experience new and different things" (7.54), and "to experience a sense of community" (7.29).

The significance of play and fun to festival attendees prompted further investigation into these phenomena through the memory work study and the results and discussion of this part of the study are set out below.

Memory Work Study

There was consensus in our understanding of the event, our own individual experiences, and our perceptions of others' experiences, which was reflected in both the written memories and the discussion. The trigger for our memories had been "Play at the Parkes Elvis Festival." We had no difficulty writing about or discussing the subject. Indeed a sense of playfulness appeared to be at the core of the festival, permeating most of our experiences as well as those of the attendees. As one of the researchers recalled, almost every interviewee endorsed *play* as
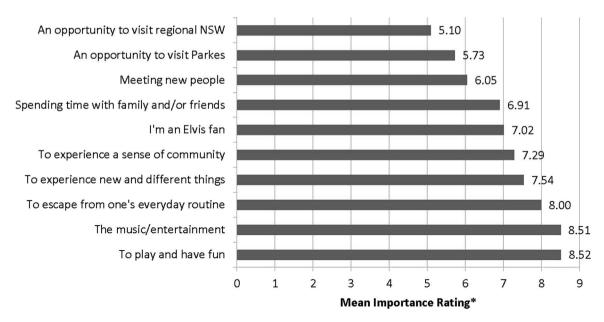
Figure 1. Motivations to attend the Parkes Elvis Festival (*n* = 371). *Motivations were measured on a 1–10 scale where 1 = *extremely unimportant* and 10 = *extremely important.*

a motivation for attendance. When presenting survey participants with the motivational options,

> [participants] would be . . . listening, nodding and then when you [would] say "to play and have fun" . . . people's faces would light up and they'd say, "Oh yeah! To play and have fun. That one [that 'play and have fun' option]! That's what I'm doing!" (Lola)

At the same time, we had been taken by surprise at how much we, too, were enjoying the festival and its opportunities to play and have fun. Once back home, we could only justify our enjoyment to disbelievers with the cliché, "you had to be there" (Juliet). We tried to make sense of how we too had been caught up in the play, excitement, and fun of the event. We turned to the sociologists, psychologists, and play theorists to enhance our understanding.

Setting up the Play Frame

On arrival at Parkes, we observed cues that contributed to the establishment of the psychological play frame (Bateson, 1973). In readiness for the festival the main shopping streets were festooned, loud speakers were in place, and retailers had taken on the theme

of the festival via their shop windows, for example, "Love me tender lamb chops at $10.99 a kilo!" (Ursula). The main stage was in place, marquees and booths were erected. The public library had an Elvis exhibition and movies showing, and the commercial souvenir shop was in readiness. Elvis impersonators were already crooning to us from street corners. A key event in the establishment of the play frame (and one about which we all wrote in our memories) was the arrival of the Elvis Express train from Sydney at Parkes Railway Station. Those already in Parkes waited on the crowded platform to welcome the newcomers. We wrote of the excitement generally:

> *Return to Sender* was blasting from the loud-speaker (Lola).
>
> The town was beginning to buzz (Lizabeth).
>
> As the train got closer, people seemed to get more and more excited, there was a buzz on the platform as music played, there were some people dancing . . . there was so much excitement it was hard not to get caught up in it (Juliet).

Women, dressed as Priscilla, met each carriage door and adorned the new arrivals (many in costume)

with Hawaiian leis. The festival had officially started, the frame had been established, and the play episode had begun.

Our memories were of the *embodied* experience of the festival, most significantly the sounds of the festival: "Elvis music being played wherever you went, it was not uncommon to see people tapping their feet, singing along or even dancing" (Juliet). Elvis music was being played on every street corner and on the central stages. The nature of his music—catchy, short, and with a certain beat being played repetitively over the 5-day period—led to an almost hypnotic, trance-like state. While two of the researchers were not completely familiar with Elvis's songs, by the end of the Festival they knew all the words. The music was constant—there was no break as there might be at another type of music festival. Also, the limited number of postmodern consumerist distractions in the town—no theme parks; no large shopping malls; not even the antique, specialty or coffee shops that characterize other country towns in New South Wales—meant that the attendees were captured by the festival, maintaining the play frame.

That year the temperature was hot, up to 43° Celsius and this too contributed to the sense of play. It was summer "holiday play weather" (Lola). We were casually dressed due not only to the venue but the heat.

Homo Ludens

Along with the other attendees we were "swept up in the excitement" (Lizabeth) of the experience and the "mood of the festival" (Lizabeth). Being away from home also allowed one to step out of one's normal life: "you're so removed from the real world" (Ursula). "You're immersed in it . . . you can't get away from the heat, you can't get away from the music, everywhere we went there was another Elvis song" (Lizabeth).

The event is bounded in space (denoted by the venues of the event) and time (in Parkes from Wednesday to Sunday). This boundedness (Huizinga, 1980) allowed for a sense of community to develop in terms of trust. "It was a little pocket, like a vacuum in time and it was awesome. I loved it" (Lizabeth).

Play created order and as Huizinga (1980) affirms, "into the imperfect world and into the confusion of

life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection" (p. 9). The ritual of the event was in many ways different from many others. It was "one big party" (Lola) commencing with the welcoming of the arrival of the guests (who were treated like celebrities) and ending with their departure. We were all caught up in it, "we were all playing the same game" (Lizabeth). We all knew or quickly learned the rules and "one of the rules was that you had to play" (Lola). The atmosphere was one of social acceptance and inclusion, people playing the same unambiguous game together, which reflected Huizinga's (1980) notion that the "feeling of being . . . in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (p. 12). Certainly for the researchers, the play retained its magic beyond the duration of the Festival and created bonds among us.

Summing up the experience in terms of Huizinga's (1980) characteristics of play we note that participation in the Parkes Elvis Festival was freely chosen and stood quite consciously outside of ordinary life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the participant intensely and utterly. There was no ulterior motive to participation. It proceeded within its own boundaries of time and space, according to fixed rules, and in an orderly manner. It promoted the formation of social groups who differentiated themselves from the common world with costume and unusual behavior.

The Play Frame

Perhaps at the Elvis Festival more so than other events, the attendees are active in creating the production—the play frame—whether it be dressing up, posing with Elvises, renewing wedding vows, adoring, and/or kissing Elvis.

> If an Elvis walked past you on the street and said, "Hey baby!" . . . the right thing to do was . . . (Lizabeth)
>
> You'd give him a smile, a wave or a wink. (Juliet)
>
> Or say something back. (Lola)

The paradox of play according to Bateson (1973) is that the message inside the play frame is real and

not real; true and false *at the same time*. The paradox at the heart of much of the playful conversation was the concrete message "this is Elvis" while the metamessage was "this is not Elvis." It would be easy to break the play frame by not going along with the rules, for example, if one responded to a "Hello, Love" overture from Elvis with "What are you saying, you weirdo!"—one would be refusing to acknowledge the message "this is Elvis." In such an instance, other attendees might have tried to remedy the play frame.

> People might have said something, like, "Oh it's alright, settle down, Love" or something, but the message would have been, "we're all playing and you should play too." (Juliet)

At one particular point during a large concert on the first night of the festival women went up to the stage to kiss the Elvis impersonator. From observing the line of women to kiss Elvis, we concluded that this behavior was acceptable in the nature of "the game" (Lola). "I'm not really kissing Elvis . . . because he's . . . just a pretend Elvis, so . . . there's no worries about kissing some strange man" (Lizabeth). "Because he does not exist, one is kissing 'a phantom' " (Juliet). Because he was the focus of the celebration, of course it was acceptable to kiss Elvis. It was "a socially sanctioned opportunity to break the rules" (Juliet) and "to kiss a man that's not your husband" (Ursula). At the same time, the men who were dressing as Elvis were sanctioned to flirt with the women. In everyday life it is unlikely that women would be approaching them asking for a photo with them or kissing them. However, in this context, as Elvis impersonators, they were rock stars. "If you're not generally considered gorgeous, it's safe to be sexy Elvis in that environment" (Lola). They could walk around being "powerful and attractive and desired" (Juliet). The women were playing the adoring fans and the men were the adored idols**.** Once again, the paradox of play (Bateson, 1973) was evident. The women were kissing Elvis (the *concrete message*) but knew it was not the real Elvis (the *metamessage*). They knew it was play. If the impersonator was kissing the fans after the show or if it had been the real Elvis doing the kissing, then "that wouldn't have been funny . . . or playful" (Juliet). It would have

been "sleazy" (Ursula). As Bateson (1973) notes, the play frame can easily be broken. Although it was acceptable for the women to be "pashing Elvis" (Ursula), when a 14 year old lined up to do the same, it was no longer play. To ensure the play frame remained intact the impersonator carefully avoided the situation.

Sociability

Optimal conditions for sociability (Simmel, 1964) were evident at the festival. The atmosphere was lively and lighthearted. People had shed pretensions including inferior and superior dispositions and deep subjective moods. "No one was there to be anything that they weren't. They were pretend [as Elvis character] but not pretence" (Ursula).
We all agreed that:

> overall, the nature of the event with many people dressed up and singing and dancing appeared to provide permission to be a bit silly and get involved. It didn't feel like real life, it was an excuse to have fun and let go. (Juliet)

> There's a trust there that you can act in these silly ways. (Lizabeth)

> It was agreed that "silly" playful behavior is not just accepted but encouraged and applauded . . . No one's going to judge you. (Juliet)

No one had to compete and we all exercised tact to ensure every Elvis felt accepted and celebrated. One could be fat Elvis, old Elvis. "And you're still a celebrity" (Lola).With the original Elvis no longer here, all the attendees could share celebrity status.

It was suggested that the festival might have given middle aged and older attendees the license to "let their hair down" (Lizabeth), which might be missing in everyday life. The festival was described by one of the survey participants as "schoolies for middle aged people" (Ursula). (*Schoolies* refers to an end of year holiday event in Australia for those who have just finished their final year of secondary school; a celebratory, hedonistic ritual for school leavers, which typically takes the form of a week-long party, in various coastal destinations.) A participant who was also a resident of Parkes told one of the researchers that life was pretty tough in Parkes for the rest of the year and people worked

very hard for not much gain. The festival served the purpose of providing some fun and a break from the hardship, a chance to "let their hair down" and "muck up" (Ursula).

It was agreed that the heat was an "equalizing factor" (Juliet); shedding clothes along with airs and graces was part of the shared experience. The group wondered if the amateur nature of many of the performances provided the impetus to play: "we're all in it together, like having a joke."

We all referred to the event as "out of the ordinary," "hilarious," "ridiculous," and "bizarre." The location also contributed to the experience of the festival as somewhat absurd—the ordinariness of an unassuming, unpretentious, Australian country town: "a nothing town" contrasted with "big time USA" (Juliet). The whole event concept was hilarious to her. "Elvis and Parkes? Ludicrous. Dead mega-star Elvis and the slow, sleepy old town of Parkes, New South Wales?!" (Ursula).

Simmel (1964) suggests that sociability may be easier among people from similar cultural backgrounds. Perhaps it is easier to exercise tact and diplomacy in such circumstances. The attendees at the festival were fairly culturally homogenous (Anglo-Australian). "It had a bit of an Aussie vibe to it . . . That blokey Australian culture . . . it wasn't stylish, it wasn't fashionable at all" (Lizabeth). It was not "trendy," "cool," or "stuck up," it was "Aussie," "straight middle of the road," and the people felt "comfortable with each other" (Lizabeth). It was agreed that one needed to be able to access "white Aussie" (Lizabeth) and "country Australian" (Lola) culture to feel comfortable at the event.

At the same time, there were opportunities for, and celebrations of Black Elvis, Asian Elvis, and Female Elvis, a case of postmodern pastiche as opposed to satirical parody. However, while leisure in postmodernity is considered no longer to be separate from the rest of life, the Elvis Festival certainly felt distant from our home lives. The bizarreness of the event went beyond the location, the heat, the music, the fancy dress, to the juxtaposition of the out of ordinary to the ordinary, the absurdness of the strange mix of American and Australian culture, or of the King engaging in everyday behavior: Elvis getting off the train and putting his esky in the boot of a car; Elvis having a cigarette and a coffee; Elvis ordering lunch: "I'll have the falafel kebab and a can

of Sprite" (Lizabeth); or at the parade recognizing an Elvis who we had previously interviewed as "the geography teacher" (Lola). Taking the Elvis phenomenon out of the US may have provided greater scope for Australians to play with the concept.

We observed that there were:

> Couples, singles, groups of friends, and family groups, it didn't seem to matter, the key thing was that people seemed to be living in the moment, even though that moment was in the past, reliving the times of Elvis in his heyday, people were happy to be in that moment. (Juliet)

Despite Elvis's rather sordid demise at the end of his life, the Elvis that was kept alive was the more sanitized Elvis. He had been immortalized as a myth, which allowed for a noncontentious Elvis to be the center and focus of the Festival. Everyone understood this Elvis and adhered to the script. The fact that the person being celebrated no longer was alive contributed to the possibility of a sanctified image— there was no possibility that Elvis could defile his own reputation in the present or future. "He's not somebody that's going to fall from grace . . . it's the end of the story. We know the whole thing [Elvis story] and we accept the whole thing" (Juliet). "And we love the whole thing" (Lizabeth).

Elvis lived on only in memory, frozen in time, and for many of the older attendees he perhaps was associated with the nostalgia of their youth and the simpler, innocent times of the 1950s and 60s, with "cheerful songs" and "cheesy movies" (Juliet). Although it was a family friendly event, we acknowledged that Elvis in his heyday was, himself, not viewed as innocent by some sectors of society. With his gyrating hips, it was thought "he was going to corrupt all the young women" (Juliet).

Simmel (1964) defines sociability as the *play* or *pure* form of association and sociability is differentiated from other forms of association by having no ulterior motive other than the enjoyment gained from the playful moment itself. Simmel (1964) cites both playful conversation and flirting as manifestations of sociability and both were evident at the Parkes Elvis Festival. The memory work participants discussed the playful flirting that took place. "It was kind of sexy, 'cause Elvis is sexy and so there was flirty stuff in the air completely, like just not super serious, but playful flirtiness in the

air" (Ursula). "It's all 'hot and steamy' in Parkes" (Lizabeth). "There was such an invitation to flirt" (Lizabeth), which was open to "anyone willing to play the game" (Lola).

Flow

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975), for flow to occur skills and challenges need to be aligned. Skills were not difficult to acquire and required at least a basic knowledge of the various Elvis characters, Elvis' history including the phases in his career, his songs, and his marriage. The two researchers who had limited exposure before the festival felt that they were able to learn the basics through the music and pageantry of the festival. The challenges presented themselves throughout the event—recognizing and singing along with the songs, recognizing the characters such as Little Egypt, and recognizing Priscilla! Responding to the cues was exercising one's skills when faced with the challenges.

To achieve a state of *flow* (the holistic sensation people achieve when they act with total involvement) one needs to lose one's self-consciousness and "be in the moment" (Juliet). In addition there must be a merging of action and awareness, a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field, a clear set of rules, and coherent, noncontradictory feedback. We all spoke of the "rules" of the game of the festival—including the shared pretence that Elvis impersonators were "really" Elvis and that event attendees should treat them as such. There was no ambiguity, everyone was playing the same game and feedback to one's actions was always coherent. "So you'd say, 'nice cape Elvis!' and he would answer 'Thanks baby!' " (Lola). "It was really clear and you knew how to participate, no matter what role you were in" (Lizabeth).

Play and Creativity

At the same time there were opportunities for creativity, from the shopkeepers decorating their shops to the performers. The festival, which encourages attendees to go in *fancy dress* as Elvis, Priscilla, or a character associated with Elvis (such as Las Vegas showgirls), lends itself to the opportunity to experiment and be creative, to play around with the

concept of Elvis and craft their own interpretations. In addition to black, Asian, or female Elvis, there was also army Elvis, "favorite sequined jumpsuit [Elvis]" (Lola), child Elvis, and even a baby Elvis. Encouraging fancy dress and creativity helped create and maintain the play frame and the sociable environment. The attendees can take on a different identity, can "role play" at being someone different. One could "pretend" (Ursula). Attendees could be celebrities for the duration of the festival. As long as one fit the Elvis theme, one could take on any identity. Lola recalled the attendees arriving by train at Parkes Railway Station: "Watching all the different Elvises emerge from the train one after the other was hilarious, like watching many clowns emerge from a tiny clown car." Those who didn't dress up could take on the role of an Elvis *fan*. The success of the "party" relied on the participating public—everyone took ownership—those who dressed up and those who celebrated the different identities: "there was a playful script . . ." (Juliet) as each participated in the theatrical production.

Despite there being a number of events comprising the Festival, the written memories tended toward certain components of the Festival—the arrival of the train and the more casual concerts in which all could play a part. Play predominated and yet it was not all play. What was *not* written about were the Elvis Parade on the Saturday afternoon, the more "formal" concert that night, and the church service on the Sunday morning. These events did not have the same play character as other parts of the festival. With the parade, the attendees, rather than engaging with the Elvises and Priscillas, were now merely stationary spectators from a distance no longer actively engaging with those dressed up. This was quite a contrast to behavior elsewhere, such as "in the park [where] you could go up and cuddle the big Elvis" (Lizabeth). The more formal concert did not encourage as much active participation as an earlier concert and the Church Service was considered to be not play, but serious. There was no pretending.

Conclusion

Leisure in the postmodern environment is seen as superficial, depthless, and meaningless, dominated by simulation and hyperreality. In postmodernity

we are less focused on the leisure experience as authentic and personally edifying. Rather, leisure takes its place in the economy of the sign, offering us opportunities to construct and reconstruct ourselves (identity) and social position. Many aspects of the Parkes Elvis Festival fall clearly into the category of simulation as attendees imitate Elvis (and other associated characters) and are happy to accept the fake and contrived as real.

However, the superficiality does not, in the case of the Parkes Elvis Festival, lead to a depthless, meaningless, or inauthentic experience. Engagement in play allowed the participants to express, regain, or reconstruct a sense of self that may have been suppressed under the regular social roles and norms of everyday life (Kim & Jamal, 2007) and to "acquire an awareness of the self as a cause of activity which invites transgression of conventional restraints" (Wearing, 1998, p. 40). The Parkes Elvis Festival represents a liminal space where participants are able to transcend everyday realities and reground their existence in the present (Kim & Jamal, 2007). The experience highlighted Huizinga's (1980) and Simmel's (1964) interpretations that play is pretend, not for any ulterior motive, but engaged in with "utmost seriousness" (Huizinga, 1980, p. 8). It is the immersion in a theme, a history, a cultural phenomenon, through music, characters, and costumes that contributes to the sociable and playful experience for attendees at the Festival. For the researchers, themselves, the research space became an out of the ordinary liminal space, transcending the customary "sanitized" research environment. It was a space in which we recognized and acknowledged our own emotions and the situatedness of our experience.

We recognize that the Parkes Elvis Festival would not appeal to all, in particular, those who do not want to play. However, the growing attendance numbers demonstrate that, for many, the Festival offers an opportunity for depthless and meaningless leisure experiences of postmodernity to be transcended through play. For them, the Festival can contribute to self-development and well-being with the consequence being repeat visitation.

This article has contributed to the small but growing body of literature in the field that focuses on sociocultural aspects of events, shifting the events literature away from the traditional management-driven approach. The intersection of play and events is clearly significant and has implications, not only for the scholarship of events, but also for their management. The establishment of the play frame, by creating a sociable environment, provides a context in which the attendees can test their varied skill levels against the various challenges the festival generates—both by design and of itself. This ensures an enjoyable and sociable play experience in which the attendees grow emotionally and socially. It makes the event memorable and one to which they are clearly keen to return.

It is recommended that event planners firstly identify those elements in their event with which attendees can immerse themselves and then construct an environment in which they can be "sociable" and enter the "play frame." The attendees must be allowed to pretend, to fantasize, to move "out of the ordinary" into liminality and then to play! By providing the appropriate props—be they physical, sensual, virtual, or conceptual—the event planner and manager can make an event memorable and authentic, and build opportunities for socialization and self-development.

Although the focus here is on a music festival in a rural Australian town, additional research is required to understand play in the context of different types of festivals and events. There is also scope to understand more about events and play with greater reference to class and gender-based experiences of attendees. The impact and intersection of technology and play is another avenue for further research.

For the present, however, we urge both event managers and event scholars and researchers, as they go about their work, to continue to explore the element of play and the accompanying elements of sociability and flow. Play, as we have established with this research and in this article, provides an out of the ordinary and memorable experience that is both sociable and creative. Most significantly, such an experience generates social and cultural growth in an enjoyable environment. In short, this is what results when events generate the all-important dynamism through play whereby patrons are "All shook up."

References

Andrews, H., & Leopold, T. (2013). *Events and the social sciences.* Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Bailey, P. (1978). *Leisure and class in Victorian England.* London: Routledge Kegan Paul.

Bateson, G. (1973). *Steps to an ecology of mind.* New York: Paladin.

Crawford, J., Kippax, S., Onyx, J., Gault, U., & Benton, P. (1992). *Emotion and gender: Constructing meaning from memory.* London: Sage.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety: The experience of play in work and leisure.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Foley, C., Edwards, D., & Schlenker, K. (2014). Business events and friendship: Leveraging the sociable legacies. *Event Management*, *18*(1), 53–64.

Getz, D. (2012). *Event studies: Theory, research and policy for planned events* (2nd ed.). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Giulianotti, R. (2005). The sociability of sport: Scotland football supporters as interpreted through the sociology of Georg Simmel. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *40*(3), 289–306.

Haug, F. (1987). *Female sexualization: A collective work of memory* (E. Carter, Trans.). London: Verso.

Huizinga, J. (1980). *Homo Ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. London: Routledge.

Kidd, B. (2013). Muscular Christianity and value-centred sport: The legacy of Tom Brown in Canada. *Sport in Society*, *16*(4), 404–415.

Kim, H., & Jamal, T. (2007). Touristic quest for existential authenticity. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *34*(1), 181–201.

Mackie, F. (1996). The ethnic self. In A. Kellehear (Ed.), *Social self, global culture: An introduction to sociological ideas* (pp. 34–44). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Patterson, I., & Getz, D. (2013). At the nexus of leisure and event studies. *Event Management*, *17*(3), 227–240.

Rojek, C. (1995). *Decentring leisure: Rethinking leisure theory*. London: Sage.

Simmel, G. (1964). Sociability. In K. Wolff (Ed.), *The sociology of Georg Simmel* (pp. 40–57). New York: The Free Press.

Small, J. (1999). Memory-work: A method for researching women's tourist experiences. *Tourism Management*, *20*(1), 25–35.

Small, J., Harris, C., Wilson, E., & Ateljevic, I. (2011). Voices of women: A memory-work reflection on work-life dis/harmony in tourism academia. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education*, *10*(1), 23–36.

Thompson, E. P. (1967). Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism. *Past and Present*, *38*, 56–97.

Veal, A. J. (2011). *Research methods for leisure and tourism: A practical guide* (4th ed.). Harlow, Essex, UK: Pearson Education Limited.

Veal, A. J., Darcy, S., & Lynch, R. (2013). *Australian leisure*. Frenchs Forest, Australia: Pearson.

Wearing, B. (1998). *Leisure and feminist theory*. London: Sage.

Weber, M. (1976). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Allen & Unwin.