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Teasing that works: Sharing the play frame

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Abstract

Teases and teasing require interaction to maintain a play frame. Play is determined by actions that are paradoxically "serious" and "not serious." Teases are not intended as serious regarding relational, and sometimes content, aspects of the message.

However, teases can contain some element of truth. As a result, the response of the teased is relevant to determining the nature of the frame. Play frames occur in teasing situations when the teased responds in a way that cooperates and therefore maintains the play frame. Such responses can take the form of laughing or repetition by the teased. This paper gives five examples of interactional teases in which the teased maintains the play frame.

Teasing that works: Sharing the play frame

Play occurs in many different contexts, however it occurs interactionally.

According to Bateson (1972), play involves the sending of metacommunicative messages which signal a play frame. Play takes the form of interaction that is serious but contains codes which signal that the interaction is not serious. ". . . Play is a phenomena in which the actions of 'play' are related to, or denote, other actions of 'not play'" (p. 181). The "play" actions are related to the "not play" actions by content, that is the statement, such as a tease, takes the same content form as a "not tease" but does not contain the paralinguistic or nonverbal codes which serve the function of specifying metacommunicatively that the statement is not serious. These codes help the interactants interpret the actions of the other, and thus signal the frame. The frame is maintained by the interaction between the playing individuals.

Bateson (1972) further argues that play contains two peculiarities which distinguish it from not play. First, during play, the messages exchanged are not meant to be taken seriously. This first peculiarity creates an interesting paradox, and the paradox denotes play. The paradox of play involves the notion that any statements made within a play frame are excluded from being interpreted outside the frame, that is they are not serious. Yet, within the play frame, statements are made to maintain the frame. Such statements are a serious matter to those who wish to maintain the frame.

The second peculiarity of play is that the idea or thing which is denoted by the play message is non-existent. For example, within a play frame, a statement is allowed

which is untrue when interpreted from a serious frame. Yet that statement may actually perpetuate the play frame and is thus "true" to the play frame.

All actions including play can be framed and thus interpreted by those who observe the actions. A frame is a construct which determines the rules for interpretation of these actions. A frame is a perspective upon which an object or activity is viewed; the frame is bounded by the assumptions or premises which define it. According to Goffman (1986), the codes which signal a frame are known as keys. A key is ". . . a set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (p. 43). Thus, in play, a transformation occurs. This transformation is a systematic alteration of an act from one form (seriousness) to another (play).

Although play is "not serious" in one sense, it does serve several functions for the interactants, and therefore is "serious." According to Glenn and Knapp (1987), play serves the function of building cohesion in relationships, play is done for pleasure, play maintains psychological and physical equilibrium, and play allows people to solve problems. These functions serve to maintain relationships in various ways. Play also defines boundaries for relationships. Rules for relationships are learned through play. And, when a "play" rule is violated, the violation can have serious implications for the relationship, or it can help the relational partners determine what is appropriate and important for the relationship.

Glenn and Knapp (1987) posited that: (a) participants construct the play frame, that play frames are created through the transformation of ordinary functions; (b) codes signaling the play frame may not be overtly available but rather assumed according to the behavior of the other or prior knowledge about the other; (c) laughter or other devices may be used to maintain the play frame; and (d) resumption of the primary frame activity, that preceded the play frame, through the introduction of a new topic or other devices, can end the play frame.

According to Armstrong (1992), teasing is a significant form of play between individuals. Teasing is play in that the content of teasing is "serious but not serious." Indeed, the content of a teasing message may include some truth. However, the metacommunicative aspect of the message often communicates the non-seriousness of the moment, context, or purpose.

Teasing may be intended by the message sender. But intention does not dictate impact. A teasing message is determined by the treatment it is given by the recipient of the tease. Drew (1987) argues that recipients most often respond seriously to the teasing message, even though there is often paralinguistic or nonverbal evidence that the tease was received humorously. Drew (1987) believes that playing along with the tease occurs infrequently. The purpose of this paper is to look at interactive teasing, that is teasing where the play frame is shared by both the teaser and the teased, and the teased plays along with the tease.

According to Drew (1987), teases occur interactionally, and the teaser usually offers a mild or indirect reproof for an overbuilt statement in the other's prior turn at talk.

Armstrong (1993) disputes that claim by categorizing teases as resulting from overbuilt statements, as well as errors and sequences ". . . which do not seem problematic in any way" (p. 2). Armstrong offers three main categories of teasables: (a) overdone statements, including overbuilding, stating the obvious, and transgressing; (b) blunders; and (c) opportunistic teases, including spur of the moment teases, and teases from the past. In the last category, a common phrase which may be heard following an opportunistic tease is, "You set yourself up for that one!"

In the following excerpts, teases are performed interactively. These examples qualify as teases because they follow the above guidelines specified by Bateson, Goffman, Glenn and Knapp. These examples can also be described according to the schema specified by Drew and Armstrong. This interactive nature can be shown primarily by sharing of the play frame through laughter, repetition (see Hopper & Glenn, 1993), and cooperation in the teasing sequence by the initially teased individual.

Opportunistic, Interactive Teases

In the first example,¹ Jay (J) is requesting that he and Ana (A) talk about bad people. Ana takes advantage of Jay in line 027 by offering an insult that she treats as a tease (T₁) by laughing. Ana's treatment of the "spur of the moment" statement as laughable demonstrates her interpretation of the utterance as playful.

(1)

020 A: Ba:d people.

021 J: No not ↑not go:ssip where you talk aboutout (.) people

022 that are okay: and you say bad things about 'em=

023 J: =But people that are acshully ba:d and the things
 024 A: [mm hm
 025 J: about 'em are true.
 026 (0.6)
 027 T₁A: Your ↑mother.
 028 A: huh-hih-ih ↑huh uh hah-hah uh
 029 A: J(ihh)ust ki(huh)dding. huh hah hah! ·uuhhh!
 030 A: Uh ho(h)ney I (h)uz [just ki(hih)ding huh]=
 031 J: [Now ↑that's cruel!]
 032 A: =HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH AH AH ·iuhh!
 033 A: uhh just kidding? hhh ↑huh-huh !huh
 034 [-huhn (°uh-u::h°)]
 035 J: [Dat's very cr↑uel.]
 036 (.)
 037 T₂J: Okay let's talk about my mom.

Jay's treatment of the statement in line 027 is initially "po-faced". The rebuff in lines 031 and 035 are performed in a serious manner as if line 027 (T₁) was an error or otherwise reproachable transgression. However, Jay comes to appreciate the tease and interacts with Ana's playfulness as evidenced in line 037 (T₂). In this sense, both parties to the interaction share the play frame.

In the second example,² Tom (T) takes advantage of a statement (T₁) made by Bill (B). Bill's statement may have been viewed as a brag, that is it was overbuilt. Yet, Tom seems to be looking for an opportunity to set Bill up by offering an insult in the form of a request for information in the immediately prior utterance.

(2)

064 T: What are ya doin with the towels here

065 How come you have so many towels.

066 (1.8)

067 T₁B: »I'm a cleansie kinda guy«

068 T₂T: Eh (0.3) You never use 'em hhh Hah U Ah=

069 T: =Hah Hah [Hah Hah Hah hih hih hhh hhh hhh]

070 B: [What is th(h)at supposed to mean]

071 (1.6)

072 B: ·hhhh (.) Go ta hell.

073 (2.5)

074 T: I ain't going back home.

Line 064 is a request for information but is delivered paralinguistically as an insult, as if to say "Bill, you are stupid for having so many towels." There is a pause, followed by a response by Bill that can serve several functions. First, line 067 is an account. It offers a reasonable explanation for having the towels. Second, it serves as a brag. Bill brags about his personal hygiene. This particular interpretation is relevant considering the activity and topic of the current segment, that is the dormmates are cleaning the room. Third, it serves as a retort to the insult. Fourth, it serves as play. This line is delivered in a fast, whimsical way.

Line 067 is responded to by Tom as if line 067 served all of the functions outlined above. Tom's playful retort on line 068 disputes both the account and the brag. Bill's line 067 is a set-up for a tease to follow. If line 064-065 serves as an insult, line

068 adds to the insult. Bill takes part in the play when he delivers line 067. Tom knows that he has teased and insulted Bill, which motivates the laugh.

If Tom's prior utterance is a set up, than line 068 acts as a spur of the moment, opportunistic tease. Tom is thus perpetuating, at this point, a one-sided play frame. Bill's line 067 was performed in a playful manner, however Bill's playful utterance (T_1) was responded to in an aggressive manner through an insult. Bill responds to Tom's insult in a reciprocal, aggressive manner. In this sense, the reciprocity of aggression is cooperative, thus maintaining and perhaps perpetuating the play frame. Although Tom's lines 068 through 069 contain laughter, Bill's lines 070 and 072 do not. Bill's response here was "po-faced."

Bill responds in lines 070 and 072 in a way that is cooperative in the play. There are laugh particles in Bill's utterance on line 072. However, although the utterance is cooperative in the play, it can be interpreted more than one way. Bill's utterance may be an acknowledgment that he has been had by Tom, thus continuing the play frame, or the utterance can be a serious statement of offense suggesting a desire to end the play frame. Tom's treatment of Bill's utterance is problematic.

The play frame is not ended by Bill's "po-faced" response. The delivery of the retort (line 072) may have been serious and thus demonstrated a desire by Bill to end the play frame. However, the play frame is ended most abruptly by Tom's line 074. In this utterance, Tom tangentializes the topic of discussion and makes a serious statement, performed with a serious tone of voice, about his desire not to go home. It

was reported by the participants that this line was indeed serious, and that both participants to the interaction were aware of the serious nature of the utterance.

Teases to Overdone Statements

In the next example,³ Joy (J) is flirting with Skeet (S) who does not seem to be interested in a romantic relationship with Joy. (In the full transcript, Joy gives Skeet several opportunities to meet or go somewhere with her, all of which he turns down in one way or another.) Joy offers Skeet an opportunity to take her and friends to see a movie and suggests that Skeet bring lots of money to pay for it (T₁). Skeet responds in line 116 (T₂) to the overdone statement (T₁) by denying the suggestion.

(3)

110 T₁J: [Bring lots a money- okay(h)
 111 S: hh [hhh (h)ave to bring lo-]
 112 J: [Uh-uh huh huh huh huh huh huh] huh huh
 113 huh huh huh huh huh huh
 114 S: ·hhhh=
 115 J: =·Uh
 116 T₂S: O(h) ho you think so [h-u h]
 117 J: [↑·hhhh] hh and then:-
 118 some friends of Billy's °is also going°
 119 (0.4)
 120 S: o[:h.]
 121 J: [So] bring: l↑ots and lots of money
 122 S: [Bring lots and lots of] money.
 123 J: [(Billions of dollars)]
 124 J: Mm hm

Yet, in this segment of talk, Joy repeats the request for lots of money in line 121, and Skeet repeats the reproof in line 122. Although the content of the lines change and are thus not verbatim repeats of the previous utterances, the overbuilding and reproof functions are repeated. Indeed, the overbuilding increases until it reaches an absurd level in line 123. Hopper and Glenn (1993) argued that repetition was an indication that the sequence of utterances were being framed as play by the participants. In this segment, both members of the interaction were involved in the play. The play was, therefore, interactively framed.

References to the Past as Material for Teases

In the next two examples, the teaser makes a reference to either an utterance or an event in the past which the recipient of the tease made or was party to. In the first of these two examples,⁴ the teaser makes a reference to a statement made earlier in the conversation. The earlier statement is not problematic, in the sense of in error, but it becomes relevant again in the immediate situation. The relevance of the earlier statement is taken advantage of by the teaser, and as such is an opportunistic tease.

In this segment of talk, the daughter is reporting to her parents about a friend who she believes needs counseling. Previously the daughter stated that she was hurt that her friend was "so screwed up." This phrase, "so screwed up," serves as the focal point for the tease which occurs approximately 30 seconds later in the conversation.

(4)

077 D: =but I don't know [if she's going

078 M: [all you have to do

079 [is start a conversation] [by sa]ying (.) um=
080 F: [well but that's more than] (.) [yeah]
081 F: =let [me straighten you out
082 M: [I was fjust wondering [heh heh
083 D: [heh heh heh
084 [heh heh
085 M: [fI wa(hh)s ju(hh)st wo(hh)nde(hh)ring heh heh
086 T₁F: let me straighten you out (.) you screw up
087 M: heh heh
088 T₂D: fyou're still screwed upf
089 M: Do you mind still sitting there
090 or do you want me tuh:(.) switch

In line 081, the father (F) makes a reference to the earlier sequence in the conversation which talked about the friend of the daughter needing counseling. This statement serves as the beginning of the play frame. It occurs within the larger primary frame which is serious and concerns the daughter's frustration in her relationship with the friend. The play initiation is taken up by both of the other participants in the interaction by laughter evidenced in lines 082 through 085. The talk in the conversation preceding this occurrence is of a very serious nature, and very little laughter occurs prior to line 081.

In line 086 (T₁), the father repeats the line that started the play frame, thus maintaining and perpetuating the play frame. The daughter then repeats (T₂) the father's laughable tease, serving to interact in the construction of the tease as well as perpetuate the play frame. The play initiator serves as a tease in that it projects what

the daughter should say to the friend. However, the projection is overdone. It would be inappropriate for the daughter to make that kind of statement to the friend. The conversational interactants knew that the father's statement was overdone and reacted accordingly. The mother ends the play frame by shifting the topic to comfortable seating arrangements in line 089.

In the final example,⁵ Paul (P) begins retelling a story that illustrates a funny incident that was created by the mother (A). The mother is the butt of the funny story. The mother takes over the telling of the story in line 003 after Paul mistells the story. At this point, the mother's take over of the story-telling seems to serve the function of saving face. In this sense, line 003 serves as a "po-faced" response to the tease inherent in the telling of the story.

(5)

001 P: It went off the time y(h)ou (.) burned
 002 [the::] (.) bea:ns on the sto[ve.
 003 A: [(burned?)] [I didn't burn
 004 beans (Paul) I left the chicken boiling.=
 005 P: =[(chicken)]
 006 B: [ch ·hhu he] hg ·h Y(h)ou remember that chicken? (.h)
 007 ha::: (·hhh)
 008 A: Da[:d came ho]:me, [I never even thought about]
 009 B: [Uhh:::::] ha [ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho, ho]
 010 A: Dad came home, the dog
 011 A: [was barking, the cat was yowli]hg=
 012 B: [(·hhh) huh ho:, ho::, ho::,]

013 A: an the house was full of smo:ke?

014 B: ha ha::

015 P: And the fire alarm (going) ba::mp, ba::m,

016 P: [°ba::m°. °ma:m°]

017 B: [and it wasn't]

018 A: [((laughs))]

019 B: just [full of smo]ke, y(h)ou,

020 y(h)ou couldn't walk in that sucker.

021 (·hh) You couldn't go in a:ny one end of the house

022 and s:ee: for more than about two inches.

023 I(h)t was: s(h)o th(h)ick. It [wa(h):s]

024 P: [f-from] from the

025 P: floor up for about a foot an a half [it was clear.

026 B: [huh

027 P: [from there on (.) it was smo:k]ey. ((laughs))

028 B: [huh hu huh huh]

029 B: It was. You couldn't see nothin ((giggles))

In line 006, Bill (B) the father begins inserting laugh particles into his utterances. Bill maintains the tease nature of the son's (Paul) initial choice to tell the story. The mother does not respond to the play frame being constructed by the father and the son until line 018. The son who begins the story in line 001, and offers a laugh particle as an indicator of the initiation of a play frame, does not laugh again until line 027. At this point in the story, the point of the joke is laid out. Throughout the telling, the father laughs. In the telling of the story, a tease directed toward the mother is implied, and the play frame is maintained by all three interactants.

Conclusion

The tease is determined by the interaction between the teaser and the teased. The teaser may choose the act of teasing for a variety of reasons: for pleasure, for equilibrium, for relational maintenance, or to resolve problems such as speech errors. The teased may choose to respond to the tease in a variety of ways provided he or she is aware of the tease: through "po-faced" responses, an aggressive act denoting displeasure, or by interactively framing the tease within play by going along with it. This interactive framing can be accomplished through several devices including, but not limited to, repetition and laughter. This sharing of the play frame allows teases to work, and ultimately can have positive affects on the individuals involved.

References

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Footnotes

- 1 Simons 2, from the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Conversation Library.
- 2 Bill and Tom, transcribed by Jim Prohs and H. Paul LeBlanc III, 1993.
- 3 A10BROWN.2:4, from the University of Texas at Austin Conversation Library.
- 4 Family 001, transcribed by H. Paul LeBlanc III, 1993.
- 5 Family 004, transcribed by Jessica Tommell and H. Paul LeBlanc III, 1993.

Appendix

The special notation used in the conversational excerpts is taken from the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson for conversation analysis (see J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (Eds.). (1984). *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, (pp. ix-xvii). London: Cambridge University.

<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Function</i>
[or [Indicates beginning of overlapping utterances.
] or]	Indicates ending of overlapping utterances.
=	Latching of contiguous utterances.
-	Abrupt halting of sound.
(1.2)	Timed pause in seconds.
(.)	Micropause of less than 0.2 seconds.
» «	Portions of utterance delivered at an increased pace.
« »	Portions of utterance delivered at a decreased pace.
CAPS	Increased volume compared to surrounding talk.
◦ ◦	Decreased volume compared to surrounding talk.
↑ or ↓	Rising or falling shift in intonation.
?	Rising vocal pitch.
.	Falling vocal pitch.
,	Continuing intonation.
:	Prolonged sound.
—	Stressed sound.
·hhh or hhh	Audible inbreath or outbreath
heh	Laugh particle.
£	Smiley voice, uttered with laugh.
()	Inaudible or muffled sound or utterance.
(())	Transcriber's comments.