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# The Why, How, and What of a Museum of Play

## An Interview with George Rollie Adams

George Rollie Adams is a historian and former teacher who has worked in the museum field for forty years, twenty-five of them as president and CEO of The Strong, where he has led the development of the National Museum of Play, International Center for the History of Electronic Games, National Toy Hall of Fame, Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, and *American Journal of Play*. Prior to coming to The Strong, Adams served consecutively as Director of the National Historic Landmarks Project and Director of Education for the American Association for State and Local History, Executive Director of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, and Assistant Commissioner of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism for the State of Louisiana with responsibility for the state museum system. He holds degrees in English, social science education, and history, and his publications include *The American Indian: Past and Present* (coeditor, first edition); *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History* (coeditor); *Nashville: A Pictorial History* (coauthor); and *General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons* (author). In this interview, he talks about why and how The Strong evolved into the first collections-based museum anywhere devoted solely to the role of play in learning and human development and the ways in which play illuminates cultural history, and he describes the ways in which the institution carries out its educational mission.

**AJP:** Could you share some observations about the way you played while growing up in a small town in southern Arkansas? And as you search your memory, can you find anything in the way you once played that might have predicted a career in managing museums, especially The Strong?

**George Rollie Adams:** I'm told I was pretty bossy with my playmates. Does that count? Mostly I played in ways that most kids don't do often enough these days if at all. My brother Bennie (five years my junior) and I could roam with our friends pretty much where we wanted—at first around our four acres on the edge of town and later, as we grew older, just about

anywhere—so long as we didn't break anything and we got home by supertime. We made up our own rules for the games we played, and we made playthings out of whatever stuff we came across while wandering around. One of my favorite things when I was five and six was waiting for the local grocery store to deliver the week's food order. We phoned it in on an old hand-cranked wall set, and the store brought it to us in orange and apple crates that I could sit in and imagine driving my own delivery truck around town or take apart and use to build things. Later I liked digging foxholes to play war games in my daddy's cow pasture—when he wasn't around of course. I also enjoyed setting up miniature battlefields with little green army men and blowing them up with firecrackers—usually when my mother wasn't around—and getting out my daddy's rakes and hoes and digging in the corner of the yard to build little towns, complete with roads and stick bridges that I could drive toy trucks and cars on. (Daddy didn't mind about that patch of ground because grass wouldn't grow under the giant elm tree there.) Except perhaps for interactive exhibits we have today for Hot Wheels, LEGO blocks, and other toys, none of that play "predicted" anything about a career in museum management, but it all helped prepare me for our work at The Strong, where nowadays we lament the scarcity of these types of free play and where we try to collect, preserve, and interpret the artifacts, stories, and records of these and other forms of play so we can document how play helps develop a range of physical, mental, and emotional skills kids need to succeed as adults.

**AJP:** So can you link any of your early play to your success in museum work?

**Adams:** Among all the ways we played back then, I believe one of them, while not predictive, does correlate well with managing a museum, or any other enterprise. I talked earlier about making up our own rules. I loved baseball growing up—still do—but we never had enough players for two full teams, and we didn't have enough room for a full-size field in any case. We played on a rectangular stretch of Bermuda grass surrounded by a wire fence. Also, almost every time we wanted to play, we had a different group of kids, usually with a wide range of ages and abilities. So, we changed the rules to fit the situation—four strikes for a younger kid and only one for the best players (unless we made the righties among those bat left-handed or the other way around), underhand pitches to the little kids and overhand pitches to the bigger kids, one or two bases instead of three (not counting home plate), hit a ball over the fence into the blackberry patch and

lose a turn, hit a grounder against a particular part of the fence and get a home run, and so on. We had no idea at the time that we were learning to negotiate and to adjust our system to the environment in which we were operating. Turns out those are invaluable management skills. The kids I played with in those ways we just made up—we did it too for basketball and football—included a future university president, a future bank president, a future airline pilot, a future chemical-plant safety manager, and a future intelligence-agency manager among others who went on to productive careers. I'm not claiming that free play led to all of that success, but I believe strongly that it helped enable it. (In fairness, I suppose I should also disclose that, regrettably, one of our motley bunch ended up in the penitentiary—but one also became a preacher.)

**AJP:** As a historian, can you comment on the way play has changed over time and in place since then? Is play now in some trouble?

**Adams:** Play is in trouble, and it's also changing. I'm not a play historian, but at The Strong I have colleagues who are, and we get to rub elbows with some of the best other play scholars in academia and elsewhere. We study their work, and we have interviewed a number in the *Journal*. Some major changes, it seems to me, characterize play in the years since I was growing up.

Play has become less free ranging and more restricted both in space and in time. There are three chief reasons for this. One, is fear parents have of abuse or injury—fear, I should add, that is fueled tremendously by today's ubiquitous media. Two, is an alarming loss of recess thanks to school administrators' fears about injury and litigation and a mistaken belief among both parents and school administrators that extra time preparing for standardized tests will do more for children than adequate time to play. Not coincidentally, way too many politicians and government bureaucrats share that view. Three is the extraordinary increase in organized sports and other extracurricular activities that end up taking so much of kids' after-school time that they don't have any left for unstructured play.

Related to this is the drive many parents have to ensure that their kids' college applications are filled with enough academic awards, sports achievements, club memberships, and volunteer activities to impress admissions counselors and garner scholarships at all the right colleges and universities.

Another major way play has changed since I was growing up is the onset of the digital age with so many ways for kids to amuse and entertain

themselves electronically. We have to be careful in assessing the impact of electronic games on play, but it's fair to criticize them for contributing to kids playing more indoors than out, and in sedentary fashion—although there is now a growing number of ways in which electronic game play encourages movement. It is also important, however, to recognize that many forms of electronic game play help kids gain valuable technically oriented and problem-solving skills and, contrary to the belief of some critics, many kids expand their cohort of friends and acquaintances and grow their socialization skills through electronic game play.

*AJP:* Have you observed these changes in your own and your family's experience?

*Adams:* Yes. I have three daughters between ages eighteen and twenty-two—each adopted, each a different nationality, and each with a different learning style. They had books, sandboxes, swings, bicycles, board games, and toys—including sticks and cardboard boxes—just as I did as a kid. But they grew up in a different time and with both play restrictions and play opportunities that I didn't have. Like a lot of parents who could afford it, we fenced our back yard, and like many parents who were concerned about safety, we didn't allow the girls to ride their bikes on our busy street. On the opportunities side, they had organized youth sports and electronic games that I didn't have. And, appropriately—and instructive to me—each played even more according to her own interests, abilities, and needs than I would have imagined before I saw them do it. For example, one engaged in a ton of organized sports, one played some organized sports, and one confined her sports play to driveway basketball, backyard Frisbee, and intensive fandom. All experimented with various forms of music but only one played extensively. Two still love being outdoors, but their sister not so much. All have played electronic games, but in varying amounts. One of the girls could take electronic games or leave them, one found her career choice in part through them, and one used them to help gain social skills and confidence as a learner.

*AJP:* Given that your scholarly interests tended toward deeply serious topics like social history and military history, how did you become interested in play and its history?

*Adams:* The answer to that question is related in part to what I just told you about my kids playing according to their interests. I don't know if this is true for most historians, but most of them that I talk with and most history majors that I talk with in other professions study history at least in part because of

childhood experiences. I got hooked on history as a kid—military history in particular—by being around other people who talked about it—not in a scholarly way but through stories about themselves or about friends and relatives. I liked baseball better, though, and so I expect that if sports history had been a field of study when I did my doctoral work, I might have gone in that direction, which would have taken me much closer to play from the outset. In any case, I came to the history of play after I arrived at The Strong, then known as the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, for its founder. Collections-based museums—which include almost all of the nation’s 17,000 museums except about 98 percent of the 300 or so who call themselves “children’s museums”—are almost always about the things they have and the stories those things hold and enable. If you have plows, harrows, planters, and tractors, you make an agricultural museum. If you have trains, planes, and automobiles, you make a museum about transportation. And so on. The Strong had toys and dolls—tens of thousands of them, more than any other museum anywhere—and they formed the largest and most historically significant segments of the museum’s collections. When I came here in 1987, however, The Strong wasn’t a museum about toys and dolls or even how people used them. In fact, it downplayed those collections. Not making effective use of them concerned me almost from the get-go, and that worry increased as time passed.

**AJP:** If The Strong was not about play when you arrived, what was its interpretive mission—its educational purpose?

**Adams:** Despite the comprehensive nature of the dolls and toys and how that made them nationally significant, they made up less than 50 percent of the total holdings. We also had a ton of home furnishings, costumes, craft and hobby items, stamps, and coins and a reasonably good collection of regional art. Much of the collections consisted either of mass-manufactured consumer goods or other material that reflected everyday life between the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of World War II, and so the museum tried to tell and interpret or explain the history of that time and of the ordinary people who lived then. At one point, we refined that a bit and said we were about “the consequences of progress, the rise of the middle class, and expressions of identity during the age of industrialization.” And both before we did that and after, we did good research, published good history, and mounted good exhibits within the traditional decorative and fine arts design formats we attempted. I can say that with modesty, because

I didn't initiate that work; I only helped expand it and keep it going as far as it would take us.

**AJP:** So what happened? It seems like the museum was based reasonably well on its overall collections.

**Adams:** It was based well enough on its overall collections, but it wasn't capitalizing on the most comprehensive and therefore the most historically important parts. And what happened is that no one cared about what we were doing. Well, that's an exaggeration. Better to say too few people cared. During the first full calendar year The Strong was open—in 1983—it attracted about 150,000 visitors (we call them guests today), and by 1986, that number had fallen to less than 70,000 annually. We were good at what we did, but we weren't the only ones around doing that sort of thing, plus our exhibits consisted almost solely of things in cases and on the walls, and there was nothing for visitors to do but to look at them and read the labels we wrote about them.

**AJP:** Did the drop-off in attendance hurt the museum financially? Is that why it eventually changed its interpretive focus to play?

**Adams:** No. In addition to the nearly half a million things she had assembled during a lifetime of collecting, Mrs. Strong had made the museum the sole beneficiary of a substantial financial trust that funded the vast majority of its activities in those early years. That's no longer the case, by the way. The trust is still an important source of funding, but today, because the museum has grown so much—in size from 150,000 square feet to 282,000; in staff from about 90, including part-time, to more than 250; and in budget from about \$4.5 million to more than \$14 million—it depends chiefly on generated revenue and contributions. I should add here that we are a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization chartered by the New York State Board of Regents, which also charters all New York public and private schools, colleges, and universities. In any case, what concerned us most when attendance fell off was that we were doing all this good work for too few people. It seemed a misallocation of resources.

**AJP:** So you decided that being about play would enable the museum to make a more important educational contribution?

**Adams:** Yes, but we didn't do so immediately. We evolved into it. In the late 1980s we increased attendance to a new four-year plateau of about 100,000 through more effective marketing, and in the early 1990s we drove it to another four-year level of about 130,000 through increased attention to

social history—using our same collections to explore topics like prejudice, health, alcohol and drug abuse, and memory and mourning. Then, when we got stuck at that level—still well under our first-year number—we got smarter and decided to ask people in Greater Rochester what they thought we should be doing. That’s when we learned that 70 percent of the people coming to the museum were families with children twelve and under, even though we weren’t doing anything special for them.

**AJP:** If you weren’t trying to attract families and children, why were they coming?

**Adams:** Because they didn’t have enough other compelling places to go in the area—which, I hasten to add, is not to say that there were no quality alternatives at all. Families with children also came because we had dolls and toys, and even though they couldn’t play with those artifacts, they could look at them, share memories about them, be amused by them, and learn where they came from and how other people played with them.

**AJP:** Is that when The Strong decided to be about play?

**Adams:** No, not exactly. We didn’t decide then to be “about” play, but after a second marketing study that used different research techniques and got the same results, we did decide to facilitate play by making our exhibits a lot more interactive. Once we did that, attendance and membership began to grow quickly, which led to even more interactive exhibits, which led to even more attendance and membership. In 1997 we opened a new entrance atrium with an operating historic wooden carousel and an operating historic 1950s diner, and we partnered with what is now Sesame Workshop on an immersive *Sesame Street* exhibit, and attendance really took off, exceeding all our projections and expectations. Based on those results and yet another marketing study, we decided to undertake an even larger expansion, and the way that process unfolded is what led us to begin rethinking our mission.

**AJP:** You’re saying that you set out initially only to make the museum larger but along the way you also changed its mission?

**Adams:** That’s it, pretty much. In the middle of our facilities planning, the post-9-11 recession forced us to put those efforts on hold, and that ended up becoming a turning point. We were contemplating adjusting the mission but not changing it completely. We had a staff team of historians and curators studying whether we should add play to class, progress, and identity and interpret all four of those, but although we found this work engaging, it wasn’t going as well as we had hoped. I remember one day in particular



when we left the meeting room and carried our discussion outside in freezing weather for a change of pace. We all wanted to move to interpreting all four things, but somehow, while that seemed better than where we'd been, it didn't feel satisfying. It seemed kind of muddy, like coffee with way too much cream in it. Not long after, Scott Eberle (now our vice president for play studies but then vice president for interpretation) and I spent a long morning mulling over all our work thus far, and then we went to lunch at a little charbroil hamburger place up near the shore of Lake Ontario, and there the light bulb went on over double orders of ham and cheese sandwiches. Almost in unison we said, "We're trying too hard to fit our square peg into a round hole. We need to go back to museum basics and be only about what our core collections can tell us. We need to be about play." And then we thought that inasmuch as no one else is doing this and our collections of toys and dolls is so unique and extensive, we need to think about doing it on a national scale.

**AJP:** And that was it? You made the switch?

**Adams:** It was a major step—probably *the* major step. The decision wasn't up to the two of us. We took the idea back to our colleagues on the team and then to the board of trustees, and together we formed a board-staff team to study the pros and cons and potential ramifications of making the museum solely about play.

**AJP:** What sort of things did you consider? What did you look at?

**Adams:** For starters, we read and re-read Brian Sutton-Smith, Johan Huizinga, Vivian Paley, and a host of others and explored the different ways in which scholars in various disciplines had attempted to define play. Then we studied the extent to which other collections-based museums included play in their missions; we looked at the history and work of professional organizations such as The Association for the Study of Play; and we reviewed all our collections to determine what we had, other than dolls and toys, that would support a mission exclusively about play and what wouldn't. Then we considered how people outside the museum would regard the change if we made it. What would our members think? What about funders and the media?

**AJP:** What struck you and the team most among the things you learned?

**Adams:** Several things almost equally—some of which I alluded to earlier. How play is an integral part of our lives. How critical it is to how we learn, especially as children, and how important it is to our physical, psychological, and emotional health. How little understanding people in general and



policy makers in particular have of that. How even then the amount of time most children have for play was diminishing due to various social and educational pressures. And what a tremendous opportunity and obligation we at The Strong had to help educate people about the history and importance of play.

**AJP:** Was there any skepticism about turning exclusively toward play?

**Adams:** Not a lot, but some—and interestingly more inside the museum than outside it. We all agreed that intellectually the change made sense, but some worried that the public and the media might regard a play mission as trivial. However, during our study, everyone on the team kept an open mind because we had a good history of strategic planning based on research and analysis, and we had confidence in ourselves, each other, and our processes. Once we explored all aspects of the idea, it seemed clearly the right way to go, and when it came time for our trustees to vote on it, they approved it unanimously.

**AJP:** How did the public and the media react?

**Adams:** The public got it immediately, and the media followed pretty closely behind. We distributed press releases and question-and-answer sheets, did interviews, and made a major public presentation for members, media, and community leaders.

**AJP:** Then what happened? How exactly did you reflect all your research and study in your mission?

**Adams:** We decided that rather than adopting a precise or narrow definition of play, we would view it broadly. In fact, we described it more than we defined it. One of the first descriptors we came up with was, “Play is a critically important activity that is basic to human nature, society, culture, and history and has an essential role in learning and human development.” Then we put together a long list of things that we believed belonged under the play umbrella: imagining, discovering, creating, pretending, competing, socializing, reading, writing, running, biking, understanding nature, collecting, and a whole lot more. Then because The Strong is a history museum and we were acting essentially as cultural historians, we put a long observation about that in our formal mission statement.

It goes like this:

The cultural history of play illuminates human experience in the following ways, among others. Exploring the cultural history of

play helps us understand who we are—how we choose to entertain ourselves, how we learn, how we relate to each other, how we see and present ourselves, what we laugh at and therefore what we dismiss or fear, how we pass along our principles and standards, how we mark change, and how we court risk. Studying the cultural history of play allows us to see basic processes, fundamental influences, and growing and waning ideas and trends that light up our national view of ourselves. Understanding the history of play shows what amused us and when, thereby revealing human leanings and common inclinations across culture and time. It shows our changing sense of fair play and underscores our notions of who will be accepted and who will be excluded. It reveals our feelings, the way we construct our identity, and how we represent the world's challenges. Play shows how we separate and how we congregate by age group, gender, ethnicity, preference, and class. Knowing how we play, what games we choose, and whom we play with traces connections between individual and group, group and culture, and self and society.

**AJP:** So by this time, you felt you were basing the museum's mission more squarely on its core holdings?

**Adams:** Yes. And even though Margaret Strong had never said or written what she thought the educational purpose of the museum should be, we felt we had finally begun to position it around the things that we knew she prized most among all the stuff she had collected during her lifetime.

**AJP:** Seems like playthings and play would have served as a natural mission for this new institution from the beginning, when the museum first opened its doors. Why didn't that happen?

**Adams:** The short answer is that the idea came up then and was dismissed as something unscholarly, uninteresting, and unworkable.

**AJP:** What is the long answer?

**Adams:** It's a lesson in how the decisions people make usually reflect their personal experiences and the times in which they live. Mrs. Strong had left so many tens of thousands of things and many millions of dollars for the museum that in an effort to get things right, the first director—Holman J. Swinney, who came in 1972, three years after her death—called in outside experts to look at her stuff and make recommendations about what kind of historical interpretation it would support. These leading figures in the his-

tory museum field came from Winterthur, Old Sturbridge Village, Colonial Williamsburg, the New York Historical Association, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, and our first mission, about the impact of industrialization, grew out of their findings. What those of us who came later didn't know until we conducted our own study, including rummaging through institutional records and reviewing all the early reports and other documents, is that each one of the Swinney consultants, upon seeing the collections, thought immediately that such things as children, fun, imagination, and play could be logical themes for a mission but then dismissed them as not weighty enough. They had biases based on their own interests and experiences, but before we condemn them for shortsightedness, we need to keep in mind that in those years there were only about three children's museums in the whole country, and The Association for the Study of Play hadn't been founded. It started the following year, in fact.

**AJP:** What is The Strong like now? Is it a children's museum? And where does the name *National Museum of Play* come into the story of The Strong?

**Adams:** The Strong is not a children's museum, even though in many ways it looks and feels like one. It is in the most fundamental sense a history museum filled with artifacts, documents, and other materials that shed light on important aspects of our past and how we remember and think about it. But The Strong is also more than that because it is highly interactive and multifaceted and filled with fun, laughter, energy, storytelling, and memory making, all of which supports learning as importantly as the collections. This combination of interactivity and interpretation serves a diverse audience of adults, families, children, students, teachers, scholars, collectors, and others around the world, all of whom are welcomed with a Disney-inspired approach to guest services. The museum has a membership of more than 17,000 households, chiefly but not exclusively from Greater Rochester and Western New York, and each year, almost 600,000 guests, representing all fifty states, visit onsite and hundreds of thousands more worldwide visit online. To put the onsite number in perspective, think of how in 2012 only half a dozen teams in the National Football league totaled more during their regular-season home football games. The collections of The Strong still number more than 400,000 items, but we have refined them significantly by removing most of the original things that didn't relate to play and adding tens of thousands of other items that do. And we are continuing to add thousands more every year.

**AJP:** So, what about the National Museum of Play? How does that relate to The Strong?

**Adams:** Between our launching as the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum and now, the institution has gone through several name and brand adjustments, including at one time using the name *Strong National Museum of Play*. Today, we are simply The Strong, and we have five major programmatic arms. Each of these has a trademarked name but none is a separate institution. The National Museum of Play is one of those arms. The other four are the International Center for the History of Electronic Games (ICHEG), the National Toy Hall of Fame, the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, and the *American Journal of Play*. ICHEG includes, as the name suggests, our collections of electronic games and related materials.

The vast majority of people who come to The Strong are coming to that part of the operation we look upon and market as the National Museum of Play because it includes all of our exhibits and all of our public and other educational programs. It also includes all of our artifact collections except electronic games and related materials. Those fall under ICHEG. Taken all together, our individual collections of toys, dolls, board games, and electronic games and related items in those two programmatic arms and in our library and archives make up the most comprehensive such historical assemblage anywhere. In terms of the individual groupings, we have long been regarded as having the most comprehensive collection of dolls on the planet, and recently I heard a leading toy company executive describe our toy collection as appearing to have an example of every toy ever made. It doesn't of course, but that comment demonstrates its massiveness and the esteem in which it is held. Our collection of board games is considered the most comprehensive in any museum in North America, and our collection of electronic games and related materials has gained international recognition as one of the finest anywhere. We believe it's also the most comprehensive in scope. The same is true of our library and archival holdings related to play and playthings.

**AJP:** What are some of the key items in the collections?

**Adams:** That's a tough question; there are so many. What's that old cliché, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?" If you have favorite playthings you'd like to see or if you're doing research about almost any aspect of play or playthings, you're likely to find what you're looking for here. For example, we have the lithographic stone Milton Bradley used to print the first Checkered Game

of Life in the mid 1800s; the most complete collection of Monopoly games anywhere, including Charles Darrow's first commercial prototype—round instead of square and personally hand-lettered and hand-colored; examples of the earliest talking dolls, including one designed by Thomas Edison in the 1890s; the prototype for Tickle Me Elmo; the legal pads in which Will Wright sketched out designs, mathematical calculations, and marketing plans for *The Sims* and other video games; the most complete run of *Playthings* magazine, which from 1903 to 2010 was the primary trade journal of the toy industry and still the most comprehensive source for its history; more than 12,000 manufacturing, wholesale, and retail toy catalogs, ranging from the late 1800s to the present; the interlocking collection of design notebooks, other personal papers, and game prototypes of Sid Sackson, who was the most influential board game designer in American history; the pre-bear family and play cartoon art of Stan and Jan Berenstain; and the personal papers of Brian Sutton-Smith—whom I mentioned earlier—one of the most influential play scholars of the twentieth century. If you'll pardon another cliché, all of that is only the tip of the iceberg. There are extensive descriptions of the collections on our website along with images of nearly 50,000 of our artifacts.

**AJP:** Tell us more about The Strong's National Toy Hall of Fame. What exactly is it? Where did the idea come from?

**Adams:** Our National Toy Hall of Fame is two things. It's first and foremost a way of recognizing and calling attention to toys and forms of play that Americans and others have enjoyed for generations. Secondly, it's a way of drawing attention to The Strong and our collections. For example, nearly 1,700 online articles reported our 2012 induction of dominos and *Star Wars* action figures, and the total web audience for those stories topped one billion.

We had the idea for a toy hall of fame during the 1990s, but other priorities prevented our acting on it immediately. Meanwhile, A. C. Gilbert's Discovery Village in Salem, Oregon, launched the National Toy Hall of Fame and trademarked the name. In 2002, when operating the hall became a larger chore than their staff had envisioned, we were delighted to buy it from them and begin giving it larger national exposure. Interestingly, one of the things that led them to sell was a massive publicity campaign that Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy collectors mounted to get those toys inducted. Raggedy Ann made it that year, but Raggedy Andy didn't get in

until later—after we had acquired the hall and subsequently most of the collections of the Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy Museum following its cessation of operations in Arcola, Illinois. Incidentally, we also have personal papers of Johnny Gruelle, who created the dolls and their stories.

**AJP:** How does a toy get into the National Toy Hall of Fame?

**Adams:** The process starts with nominations. Anyone can nominate a toy to the National Toy Hall of Fame. The easiest way is to go on its website. Briefly, inducted toys have to be widely known, used by multiple generations, facilitate some type of learning, and be safe for their intended audience. Each year a staff team reviews all the nominees and selects twelve finalists. A national committee of historians, educators, and other individuals who exemplify learning, creativity, and discovery through their lives and careers then votes for two. Sometimes we induct a third solely on the basis of profound and innovative impact on toy design or play.

**AJP:** Tell us about the International Center for the History of Electronic Games and how that came about.

**Adams:** We established ICHEG in early 2009 because we realized that electronic games were quickly changing much about how people play, that we held very little material (less than five hundred items) with which to tell the story, and that few institutions anywhere were collecting and preserving the stuff. Stanford University had the principal collection, and the University of Texas had a small but important collection. We saw ICHEG both as a way to sharpen our internal focus and as a way to call attention to our efforts externally so as to build the credibility and relationships we needed to succeed.

**AJP:** What is the scope of ICHEG today?

**Adams:** Now at more than forty thousand items and still growing, it includes many thousands of video games and other electronic games, examples of all the major game platforms, thousands of related artifacts, probably the largest publicly accessible collection of electronic game magazines anywhere, and a growing archive of personal papers and business records from pioneering game designers and companies. Taken together, these illustrate how electronic games have been conceived, developed, sold, and used and how they have affected people's lives. Based on research, we believe the ICHEG collection is one of—if not *the*—largest and most comprehensive in the world. Plus, its value as a vehicle to support historical research and interpretation is enhanced by virtue of residing here among The Strong's

other collections of board games, mechanical toys, comic books, and other play-related materials that influenced the design and development of video games in one way or another.

Currently our preservation activities include a unique project using funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to capture on video and therefore preserve a historical record of representative play of nearly seven thousand of the games we hold. We expect that this record will be an invaluable tool for scholars and other researchers.

**AJP:** You alluded earlier to how electronic games are changing the way kids play. Can you elaborate further about their impact on peoples' lives?

**Adams:** Electronic games are changing how both children and adults—the average video game player is well above thirty—spend their leisure time, how they learn, and how they connect and interact with one another. As I also noted earlier, public opinion is divided on electronic game play, but research shows people can and do learn by playing electronic games. They are increasingly used for training purposes in the military, in healthcare and other industries and workplaces, and in many classrooms around the country. The jury is still out about the effectiveness of their use in schools, as nearly every issue of *Education Week* attests through reports of both successful and failed experiments. But here's one impact you can see just by watching almost anyone under middle age use smart phones and other electronic gadgets. You can safely bet that those individuals didn't become incredibly facile with those devices simply by using them, though surely that helped. What may have helped more, I would argue, is that the majority of those individuals grew up sharpening hand-eye and other skills playing electronic games. In addition, just as over time popular music and movies contribute icons and touchstones that people share across generational, cultural, and political boundaries, so do electronic games—and they go movies one better. Through multiplayer online games, players create real-time shared experiences.

**AJP:** Do video games encourage violence?

**Adams:** Here's what I can tell you about that. Research doesn't support the claim some make that playing electronic games causes people to go out and inflict bodily harm on others. Also, over time almost every popular new medium of entertainment from novels to comic books to movies to television has encountered such criticism. I don't know if that happened with board games and puzzles in the late 1800s and early 1900s—I suspect



not—but it's also fascinating that what some people would consider violent subjects—wars of all types in particular—were vividly portrayed on the covers of those playthings. Lastly, there is substantial literature that suggests children use stories and games of these kinds, along with rough-and-tumble play, to experiment constructively with concepts and topics such as power, aggression, fantasy, and even death. Play violence is not real violence.

**AJP:** What is the role of the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong? Is it to preserve and encourage play scholarship?

**Adams:** Essentially yes, if you include the history of both how people have played and what they have played with. The library and archives includes more than 140,000 books, periodicals, and trade catalogs and thousands of linear feet of manuscripts and documents, including those that fall within ICHEG. I mentioned some of these holdings earlier. Others of particular note include the personal papers of former University of Chicago Laboratory Schools preschool and kindergarten teacher Vivian Paley, author of a dozen best-selling books on early-childhood education; some 2,400 Little Golden Books, representing popular children's reading over six decades; an almost complete run of video game strategy guides published by Prima Games; and the papers of such other video game pioneers as Ralph Baer who developed the first video game for play on home television sets, Don Daglow who pioneered simulation and computer baseball games along with the first graphical massively multiplayer online role-playing game, Dan Bunten who pioneered multiplayer games, and Ken and Roberta Williams who among many other accomplishments developed the first graphic adventure video game. The library and archives is also the vehicle through which The Strong also offers paid research fellowships, even though recipients, like any other scholars, can study any of our collections.

**AJP:** Where does the *American Journal of Play* figure into all these activities of The Strong?

**Adams:** At the time we launched it in 2008, it was the only interdisciplinary scholarly journal anywhere devoted solely to play and published more than once a year, and it remains one of only two. Its role is to provide a vehicle for the work of and a forum for the perspectives of leading play scholars in psychology, early-childhood education, history, folklore, anthropology, sociology, popular culture, biology, neuroscience, technology, and other fields, and we are pleased that its list of contributors reads like a who's who of play experts. I sometimes like to think of it as a lineup analogous

in quality to the original list of inductees into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. The first volume alone includes Stuart Brown, Doris Bergen, Gary Cross, David Elkind, Joe Frost, Peter Gray, Thomas Henricks, Jaak Panksepp, Anthony Pellegrini, Dorothy Singer, Jerome Singer, and Brian Sutton-Smith among other luminaries, and you can find them and all our other contributors listed in the various tables of contents on the *Journal's* website. Even better, inasmuch as access to the *Journal* is free online, you can go there and read their work, which they and our editors have labored to present in a manner suitable for a wide public audience.

Therein lies our larger purpose—to make the latest scholarship on play available to and accessible for everyone from other scholars to educators and students and from parents to policy makers and the media. Want to know how your brain functions in play, why recess is important, the role of play in mate selection, how and why wolves and other animals play, how mothers in sixteen countries around the world rate their children's daily play activities, why having imaginary companions is a healthy form of play, how play and playfulness are good for healing and health, how play plays out in children's literature, how scholarship about play has evolved over time, how the way we view childhood and treat children has changed over the course of American history, why children need to play outdoors, how play can aid psychotherapy, how to use play in teaching writing, and why physically active play aids cognition? You'll find the answers to those and dozens of other important play-related matters in the pages of the *Journal*. All of this goes to the heart of The Strong's mission to help people everywhere understand the critical role of play in our lives and in society.

**AJP:** Let's go back to the programmatic arm of the National Museum of Play. What is its role, and how does play "play out" there?

**Adams:** Okay. First, to clarify: All the programmatic arms of The Strong reside in the same facility in Rochester. The National Museum of Play is by far the largest arm of The Strong, and as I indicated earlier, it's the part that includes all of our exhibits and public programs plus our other public spaces and amenities. Among these are the historic carousel I mentioned before, an electrically powered train ride that accommodates up to twenty-five children and adults, our *Dancing Wings Butterfly Garden* that flies some 500 tropical butterflies, a 300-seat theater, two retail shops, the historic diner I also mentioned earlier, and a food court in which we own and operate a Subway restaurant and two other food franchises. The National

Museum of Play is therefore the aspect of The Strong that attracts the bulk of our nearly 600,000 annual guests. It also includes all of The Strong's collections that are not part of ICHEG or the library and archives.

The way play "plays out" chiefly in the National Museum of Play is through our interactive exhibits, which cover more than 100,000 square feet. Among these are *Reading Adventureland*, which we refer to fondly as the world's largest pop-up book; *Can You Tell Me How to Get to Sesame Street?*, which re-creates scenes and experiences from the iconic children's television show; *Super Kids Market*, a super-realistic kid-size supermarket with five check-out lanes; *Down a Sunny Dirt Road*, which re-creates the world of the Berenstain Bears; and *eGameRevolution*, which chronicles the history of electronic games and includes a real-life video game arcade and many other electronic game-play opportunities. Other exhibits include *American Comic Book Heroes*, *Kid to Kid*, and *Field of Play*. In *Field of Play*, we offer a high-energy combination artifactual and interactive explanation of six key elements of play: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. Also included in the National Museum of Play is a giant display of toys that are in the National Toy Hall of Fame and 20,000 square feet of visible storage that we are in the process of turning into a comprehensive artifact-rich yet highly interactive exhibit titled *America at Play*. The *eGameRevolution* exhibit is the first segment of that renovation; the second will be about board games and puzzles primarily; the third about imaginative play with dolls, stuffed animals, and action figures; and the fourth about play with construction and transportation toys.

**AJP:** Can you give us some examples of the interactives or of particular play activities that these exhibits accommodate or facilitate?

**Adams:** That's also a tough question because there are so many it's difficult to choose particular ones. Let me answer chiefly in general terms. Our interactive interpretive spaces are filled with opportunities for kids to pretend by dressing up, to act out adult roles in realistic kid-size settings, to solve puzzles, to explore by crawling and climbing, to take turns, to share, to play with others, to sit quietly and read, to ask questions, to hear stories, to share thoughts and feelings, to make things, to test their abilities and gain confidence in them, to make memories, and a whole lot more.

Adults play too because being around kids loosens them up and, I'd even say, gives them permission to have fun in a public space. Obviously adults don't generally shop in the kid-size supermarket or crawl around

in Jack's beanstalk in *Reading Adventureland*, though we have seen them doing those things. But they do crafts with children, share memories, tell stories, play games, and learn about the history of play and the play-related artifacts that are displayed and interpreted in the exhibits. Grandparents love to bring their grandkids here to play, young couples come on dates, young parents come for nights out without their children, and seniors who have grandchildren living elsewhere come simply for the joy of being in such a playful environment.

**AJP:** Do your guests "get" how important play is?

**Adams:** This depends on a variety of factors including age, companions, purpose of visit, and what parts of the museum they experience—taking advantage of all of it is a full-day affair and more. But yes, in thinking about the average guest, I believe they do "get" its importance in a very fundamental, and perhaps the most important, way. They know the museum is about play, and they know they have fun here. They may or may not all realize that they are learning here, but we know from guest feedback that many do. So whether or not they leave saying to themselves, "Play is important," or they have a ton of newly gained information about the history and meaning of play, they leave knowing that something, or some things, pleasurable, memorable, and good happened here, and they equate all of that with play and thus come to value play more than they did initially.

**AJP:** You have referred several times to education and public programs. Will you tell us a little about those?

**Adams:** That's not easy to do briefly. Several times a year we offer weekend-long public programs around new exhibits—each year we bring, sequentially, three borrowed exhibits into our flexible gallery—or popular themes such as super heroes, fairy tales, action figures, model trains, pets, children's authors and illustrators, and nonreligious holidays like Valentine's Day and Halloween. We also offer numerous educational programs for students and teachers. These include more than forty different standards-based lessons that our staff educators tailor and teach to classes that come in from area schools. Plus, we offer a variety of on-site and off-site professional development workshops about play and learning. We also partner with several area colleges and universities in ways that include hosting interns and student teachers, hosting the schools' off-site classes or play-related professional-development activities, and jointly organizing and presenting play-related conferences for either public or scholarly audiences. In

addition, we operate a preschool—the Woodbury Preschool—that uses a Reggio Emilia–inspired, play-based curriculum to serve sixty children ages three and four divided into four sections. Through this program, we not only serve those students and their families, but we expand both our own and others’ knowledge about the ways in which play facilitates learning.

We also have an active community outreach program. We try to provide museum access to those who might not be able to experience it without assistance and those who might be able to make unique use of the play opportunities we can provide. For example, we admit every foster family in an eleven-county region to the museum for free because so many of these families are economically challenged. We admit all play, occupational, and therapeutic counselors and their clients for free so that, having mastered challenges within their home and office spaces, they can play together here in a different yet still safe and friendly environment. We offer facilitated experiences to pediatric residents from the University of Rochester’s medical school so they can observe healthy children at play. And we partner with a host of social-service organizations to provide play-based experiences for children with autism and their families, single mothers emerging from incarceration, refugee families, and others.

**AJP:** Are there any other play-related interpretive or educational activities that The Strong engages in regularly?

**Adams:** We have more than a dozen staff who contribute regularly to three blogs we run about play: the Play Stuff blog based on our collections, the CHEGheads blog based in particular on the collections of ICHEG, and the *re:Play* blog that offers commentary on play related to current social topics. Many of the latter, when written by Scott Eberle, are repurposed for the website of *Psychology Today*. We also have a minibranch of the local public library. We own the books and the public library assists us with circulation services. We display the books in more than two dozen locations throughout the museum and guests can dig deeper into any subject by checking the books out, taking them home, and returning them to any branch library in the city. Or, guests can read them here. In addition, Eberle and Jon-Paul Dyson, our vice president for exhibit research and development and director of ICHEG, are sought-after speakers nationally, and we host and cohost national conferences here on play and on toy and game design.

**AJP:** You have not said anything about play advocacy. Does The Strong engage in any direct advocacy activities with policymakers?

**Adams:** The answer to that depends in large part on what you mean by “direct advocacy.” We probably don’t interact directly with policy makers as frequently as some other play-related organizations, and we don’t fund outside research studies, white papers, and the like about play. That’s in part because some other organizations are designed more specifically or better positioned in other ways for those activities than we are. The chief reason we don’t do more of that, however, is that we believe the best way we can advocate for play is through our unique position as a collections-based museum studying, interpreting, and preserving the history of play and the things that help enable it; engaging in the type of institutional research, writing, and publishing that I have described; mounting the types of exhibits and offering the types of programs that I have enumerated; and effectively publicizing all those activities and their substance and serving as an authoritative resource to policy makers and the media. For example, through the efforts of our marketing and communications staff, key findings published in the *Journal* routinely reach extended audiences through a variety of national news media, including the wire services. In addition to the coverage we encourage ourselves, all the major television and cable news networks, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and others call on us directly for information about both play and the history of play-related artifacts.

**AJP:** Can you say what’s next on the horizon for The Strong?

**Adams:** One constant always on our horizon is change. We believe emphatically that to remain successful, organizations have to keep moving forward. International business performance expert Ichak Adizes said it best when he wrote in *Corporate Lifecycles*—and I paraphrase—that an organization that feels self-congratulatory for having achieved stability is an organization in trouble. Within the context of our core mission about the history and importance of play, we are always looking for ways to improve and get better and for things we are not doing but should be. Over the short haul, we expect to complete our *America at Play* exhibit, renovate our National Toy Hall of Fame, and install some form of water play. We also expect to expand our school lessons program through distance learning, and we expect to increase our use of social media for both interpretive and marketing purposes. Over the long haul, we must continue to grow our collections and make them as accessible as possible—digitally and otherwise—to students, teachers, researchers, and others because play will continue to change and

evolve. Because of that and because of the success we have experienced to date, we are committed to considering the feasibility of any potential new opportunities to carry out our mission, both in cyberspace and in other physical spaces.

**AJP:** One final question. You talked earlier about how you played as a child. How do you play now, and do you have any last words about play for our readers?

**Adams:** That's two questions—you're playing with me. I play in a lot of ways. I read, watch movies, listen to music, follow sports, enjoy our two dogs, and occasionally toss Frisbees and shoot some hoops. Until my daughters aged out of organized softball, I got in a lot of throwing and hitting with them, and I'm still up for a game of catch anytime. We have a house full of board games and a garage full of bicycles, and I have a few games on my smart phone but I'm not very good at them. I also write for fun and enjoy driving. I welcome almost any excuse to take a spin through the rolling farmlands, small towns, and natural scenery of our state's Erie Canal corridor and Finger Lakes region. As for last words about play, we have a lot of quotes about play posted on The Strong's website and in various places around the museum. Let's close with one of my favorites, which we once put on souvenir museum baseballs. It's from Ralph Waldo Emerson and worth anyone's time to remember: "It is a happy talent to know how to play."