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Why play?

**THE MEANING OF PLAY IN RELATION
TO CREATIVITY**



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In today's increasingly leisure oriented era, play is often viewed and projected as a measure of happiness and success in life. This is evident in advertising slogans and proverbs like "Play hard, life is short!" or "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". But if play is the panacea for the good life, what is it exactly? What do we mean by play and playing, and what does it consist of?

By re-visiting these questions, I want to address what might motivate play and why it tends to be associated with the "good life".

REASONS FOR PLAYING

For centuries, educators, evolutionary biologists, and social scientists pondered on the role of play and its place in the life of individuals. They keep asking: what is the role of play in child development and adult life? But also, more broadly, what is the role of play in the life of most animals since we are not the only playing species. Puppies like children, but also adult dogs as well as humans spend most of their time engaging in activities that are of high energy cost but do not seem to serve any other functions than to be enacted, a source of apparent *gratuitous pleasure*, something that does not seem to carry much weight in terms of survival function, from a purely rational and utilitarian perspective. So, why play?

In trying to make sense of play behaviors, researchers have emphasized possible physiological and psychological reasons that could be assigned to such gratuitous, yet unmistakably

joyful and absorbing activities. They continue to do so via observations, descriptions, and proposed explanations guided by the basic need to figure what might be the meaningful place of play activity in the life of the individual. Some theories proposed that play comes from an innate propensity to imitate, to relieve accumulated stress, or to prepare and exercise for more serious functional actions (Huizinga, 1938). Other considered play as the expression of a need to compete and assert oneself in relation to others, or simply the general outlet of excess energy. In his seminal 1938 book entitled "*Homo Ludens*" (*Playing or Rejoicing Man*), Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) added significantly by providing a broad, more cultural breath to these rather minimalist theories (Huizinga, 1938). He considered play as a distinct marker of human cultures in general. First, Huizinga shows that although most animals play, therefore more than purely cold mechanical entities, human play is distinct because it adds new layers of consciousness to play behaviors. As Huizinga writes: "We play, and we are conscious of playing: we are therefore more than rational beings, because play is irrational".

Human play is indeed a deliberate and conscious expression of freedom from ordinary life, freedom from bare survival and utilitarian existence. It is by definition and by consciousness, universally joyful and engaging. The mark of distinction of play is that it is a fundamental *liberation* from ordinary life, from the purely functional and the utilitarian aspect of existence.



At the cultural level, play is temporally and spatially marked, as for example, the timely recess periods and playground locations assigned to children's play at school. The same is true for recurrent group rituals and celebrations across human cultures, all having temporal and spatial markers, with fixed schedules and locations. It is also source of order and absolute (supreme) rules regarding competition. Within this created order, there is promise of surprise and unpredictable outcomes, the main source of drama and joy. Particular forms and kinds of play activities obviously dominate each culture and each developmental age, but they hold some universal and invariant features. Looking at these features help us to capture what might be the essence of play.

CHARACTERISTICS AND KINDS OF PLAY

In a book entitled "Man, Play, and Games" (1958/2001) French essayist Roger Caillois (1913-1978) describes what would be the 5 constitutive characteristics of play activities: *freedom* (no obligation); *separation* (circumscribed in time and space); *non-productive orientation* (not geared toward a specific production of goods); *rules* (includes conventions regarding the suspension of reality); and finally is *fictitiousness* (entails an awareness of a reality that is different from ordinary life) (Caillois, 1958/2001). In his essay, Caillois also proposes that play activities fall invariably into one of 5 basic types: plain agitation and production of laughter, like children's noise and gossips (*Paidia*); play of competition, like soccer (*Agon*); play of chance, like lottery (*Alea*), play of simulation, like pretend and disguise (*Mimicry*), and play of dizziness, like swinging or

climbing (*Ilinx*). Following this taxonomy, all play activities would fall in one of these 5 categories, with particular weights and specific expressive forms depending on age and culture. Caillois' taxonomy of play might not be exhaustive but it is a helpful conceptualization to try answering the question: why play?

CREATIVE MINDSET OF PLAY

Within the conceptual framework briefly presented above, we can extract some invariant features of play, above and beyond their kinds and characteristics. These invariants, I would propose, are two-fold and can be summarized as follow: All forms of play, across cultures, entail gratuitous exploration and representation. Both form together what can be defined as play awareness, as opposed to ordinary life awareness that is primarily alienated to goals, productions, and other basic labor-intensive chores.

In play awareness, there is basic freedom, as Huizinga proposes, the freedom to explore and to deviate, the *freedom to test possibilities*. This idea is probably what gets us closer to answering the question of why play?

At all ages and across cultures, play is dictated by the basic need to probe the limits of our own existence, probing the possibilities of other existences via exaggerated re-enactments and representations of ordinary awareness. Play might be the need to pretend in order to figure who we are, to better objectify who and what we are in ordinary life because the

ordinary awareness arising from it is too close to oriented chores and goals. Ordinary awareness does not give as much access to the limits and possibilities of what one might be or could be. Therefore play, in the most generic and universal psychological terms would be the need to explore the limits of our own existence: the limits of our strength, courage, adversity, destiny, production, and agency. Accordingly, play would be the expression of an irresistible need to put to test the limits of our body in action, our luck in gambling, our existential choices and social roles in pretending and acting, our physical and intellectual capacities in competing, the limits of our survivability in risk taking.

As the many advertisements try to proclaim, through play, we do feel alive in a way that is different from the feeling of being alive in ordinary life. It is a feeling that is open ended. It is a creative mindset by definition because it is awareness of possibilities and of surprise outcomes: winning, losing, succeeding, resolving, affecting, surviving or failing to achieve. The excitement and joy associated with play comes from this cultivation of surprises and the contemplation of outcome possibilities: basic tension creation and relief of tension. This is source of an intrinsic pleasure, the pleasure of feeling more intensely alive than in ordinary life. It is driven by the deep pleasure of discovering new limits and new possibilities for self or for the group of affiliates.

In this view, the primal reason for playing is to exhaust the possibilities of our own existence. It is a creative liberation from the highly constrained possibilities of being in ordinary life.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN CHILDREN'S PLAY

Children need to play, whether they are from a rich or poor background, growing up in a rural, traditional, densely or sparsely populated environment, regardless of their developmental niche and all the things they inherit by the circumstances of their birth. However, the forms, rituals, and content of their play may vary tremendously from culture to culture, sometimes even from neighborhood to neighborhood. There are fads and trends, ways of challenging each other and co-creating playful activities with others, like in recent months the carnival-like "Harlem shake" on the world wide web stirring over 2 billion viewers in less than 3 months. Even individual games are not immune from temporary traditions and rituals transmitted sometimes in a viral fashion, crossing cultural and social class lines, like hula hoop of the 1950s or the "scoubidou" of the 1960s (column weaving of colorful small

plastic tubes). Each generation remembers specific, dominant activities on their playground, like the game of marbles played by Swiss pupils during recess that Piaget used and documented in his seminal 1932 on the moral judgment in children (Piaget, 1932), trying to capture the reasoning about social rules in the perspective of development.

Cultural variations in children's play are in great part determined by complex historical and sociological factors, as mentioned in the preceding examples. But they also depend on the physical ecology in which children grow up. Let us not forget that according to recent surveys, 80 % of the world's population lives on a family income of less than \$6000 a year, with half of the world's population living on an average of 2 dollars a day. Of the global worldwide income distribution, 90 % of the people from rich industrial European, North American and Asian (OCDE) countries are at the top 20 %. In contrast, half of the sub-Saharan African population lies at the bottom 20 % of the wealth distribution (Kent & Haub, 2005; UNDP, 2006). Moreover, in less developed (poor) countries, 1 in 5 children do not finish primary school education, and only half partake to secondary education programs that typically entail much sacrifice in fees to poor families (UNDP, 2006).

Play in relation to creativity needs to be considered in the context of such discrepant realities, what meaning and place creativity might have in the various, highly contrasted developmental circumstances of children. More research is needed to capture the impact of such context on the role and place of creative play, but also on how children's creative initiatives can alter practices in the community at large, creating traditions and cauldrons of novel practices spreading to adults, like new games and new ways of being together.

In today's social media and global world, across cultures, younger generations never had so many opportunities to show their talents and creative skills, never had so many opportunities to innovate and teach older generations, to become instruments of changes within their own culture. But for this, they need the tools and most children in the world don't have access to them. How can we change this?

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