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Review

On Play and Playing

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A B S T R A C T

The paper offers a review of the development of the concept of play and playing. The true beginnings of the development of the theories of play are set as late as in the 19th century. It is difficult to define play as such; it may much more easily be defined through its antipode – work. In the beginning, play used to be connected with education; it was not before Freud's theory of psychoanalysis and Piaget's developmental psychology that the importance of play in a child's development began to be explained in more detail. The paper further tackles the role of play in the adult age. Detailed attention is paid to psychodynamic and psychoanalytic authors, in particular D. W. Winnicott and his understanding of playing in the intermediary (transitional) empirical or experiential space. In other words, playing occupies a »space and time« of its own. The neuroscientific concept of playing is also tackled, in the connection with development as well.

Key words: *play, playing, transitional space*

»Let my playing be my learning, and my learning be my playing«

J. C. Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805)

Introduction

Though we all think we know what the subject-matter is when play is spoken of or listened about, it may in fact better be described by its functions than by a formal definition. There is no universally accepted, comprehensive definition of play, though the analysis of various different historical periods confirms the well-known fact that children engage in playing. Play is present in numerous diverse cultures, regardless of the fact that its contents may differ in individual cases. Play cuts across the boundaries of species, so that the young of many animals demonstrate behaviour similar to a child's play.

However, too rigid a definition of play would destroy its very essence, same as would too strong a handshake murder the bird in the hand[1]. Play »takes hold of« our emotional life. It possesses a creative motivation characterised by its improvisational and innovation quality, ending in successive elaboration and refraction.

The attempts of defining play have mainly relied on its negation, i.e. on the establishing of what play is not – work. Play and work are often considered strong binary antipodes, deriving from several characteristics linked with them. Work, for instance, ensures the material basis for life, gives life a meaning; play lacks the seriousness of the talent for work. These opposite qualities of play and work stay present throughout one's whole life, though childhood is popularly perceived as the time of play, whilst the adulthood is understood as the time of work.

The Role of Play in Education

The first known discussions on the subject of play refer to its relationship with education and date back to Greek philosophers Plato (427–348 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). The topic of play is present in discussions of later date as well, in particular in those written during the early Christian era and later, in the Middle Ages. French historian Philippe Ariès[2] claims that the concept of childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages, which might have been the reason for the absence of the theories of play in that historical era. This author, naturally, does not claim that children did not play in those times. He, however, does insist on the fact that the child's play

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was not, except in the earliest stage of life, differentiated from the adult play before the 18th century. It was only then the change in the family structure, improving in education etc., resulted in the recognition of childhood as one of the stages of life marked by its own special features.

English political philosopher John Locke[3], though raised in Puritan spirit (with deeply rooted Calvinist work ethics and, as a consequence thereof, a tendency towards preventing children from playing except when it was related to Biblical stories, and hence serving moral uplifting), still gave one of the earliest major contributions to the modern concept of the role of play in education. Locke[3] held that the main objective of education should be virtue. He took a stand against the use of physical punishment as a means to motivate children to learn. He believed that children learn better when learning is made recreational than they do under pressure, since the wish to learn is improved in this manner. Besides having contributed to the understanding of the important role childhood plays in the human development, Locke[3] also contributed to the appeal of the Enlightenment movement for introducing social changes. The most prominent among them was political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau[4], who, in his work Émile (1762), emphasised the theory that children undergo various developmental stages, according to which education should be shaped. His theory of play was mainly based on the standpoint that play is instinctive and that it represents the natural way of instigating physical and emotional development. Rousseau[4] did not believe that play was wrong or that it was a waste of time; he rather assumed that the main purpose of childhood was to make children happy. The Romantic Movement took over Rousseau's[4] emphasising that learning followed the nature and that is was self-realisation in itself, and pointed out diverse experiences that become available to children during play.

After the publishing of Darwin's[5] work On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life, several of his followers endeavoured to offer an adaptive explanation of play that could apply to all species in the sense of Darwin's[5] theory of evolution. These theories were the first endeavours to explain play rather than merely describe it on the basis of observation.

Hence, the first true theories of play arose as late as in the 19th century. Among the most prominent theoreticians of play were German philosopher J. C. Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) and – later – English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). They created a theory they called the energy surplus theory in order to explain the animal play. Karl Groos[6,7], Spencer's German contemporary, also offered a biological explanation of play. Groos[6,7] claimed that play was an expression of the instinct necessary for the survival of a species. Play is practice and represents the development of competence, same as sex and fighting, used later in life. For Groos[6,7], the purpose of play is preparing for life. He asserted that »… instead of saying, the animals play because they are young, we should say, the animals have a youth in order that they may play«. He further argued that play is the means by which young mammals practice the skills they must develop to survive into and through adulthood.

The majority of the mentioned theoreticians of play maintained the view that play was no serious activity, but that it gives pleasure. Based on observations and experiments, John Dewey[8] offered a scientific approach to learning. In his writings, he often presented the world through binary oppositions and thus defined play as an unconscious activity that has no reason apart from itself; work, in contrast, is an activity that involves an interest of some kind. In Dewey's[8] view, play represents almost a developmental task which is subordinate to work.

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) on the Meaning of Play

The famous Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget[9] understood play as the means for accommodation and assimilation of reality. Play and imitation constitute an important part of Piaget's[9] theory, and they both come under the general definition of play. He argued that play is an almost complete assimilation, with no attempt of adaptation to the outer reality. A child playing »planes« with a rectangular piece of e. g. wood usually pays no attention to a certain structural design needed for mastering gravity or making use of air pressure. The child simply assimilates the piece of wood into the existing plane scheme. Contrary to this almost pure assimilation is imitation, or a child's serious attempt to achieve adaptation with the outer reality. A house in the neighbourhood caught fire during a school class. Two days later, children were playing with cubes. Their »house« caught fire, and children started playing the roles of firemen and victims in the house on fire. By simulating this situation during their play, children made serious attempts of accommodation to the reality they experienced two days earlier. Both assimilation and accommodation include interactions that put a child into relation with its environment and the child's reality. Giving and taking in play, as well as imitation, represent one of the ways in which children learn about the world surrounding them.

In play and imitations, a child learns about symbols, or that one thing may stand in place of another. If a child puts a hat on his/her head, s/he becomes a cowboy or a postman. The hat is a symbol. Play itself is a symbolic representation of the child's personal inner world.

Piaget[9] further understood play as a means for mastering egocentrism. The egocentrism of a pre-school child is characterised by the incapability to see or take the standpoint of another person. Through repeating social interactions, the needs, interests and goals of another individual begin to capture the child's attention. It often occurs in play of children of this age that two very different egocentric standpoints collide. Thanks to this collision,

children come closer to comprehending that other people have their own ideas, wishes and thoughts, too.

Sigmund Freud on Play

In his essay Creative Writers and Daydreaming, Freud[10] sets the first traces of imaginative activity into childhood. Play or games are the child's most beloved and most intensive preoccupation.

Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real. In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality; and he likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child's »play« from »fantasying«[10].

The creative writer does the same as the child at play, said Freud[10] and continued »He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality. Language has preserved this relationship between children's play and poetic creation. It gives the name of Spiel [»play«] to those forms of imaginative writing which require to be linked to tangible objects and which are capable of representation. … The unreality of the writer's imaginative world, however, has very important consequences for the technique of his art; for many things which, if they were real, could give no enjoyment, can do so in the play of fantasy, and many excitements which, in themselves, are actually distressing, can become a source of pleasure for the hearers and spectators at the performance of a writer's work«.

The deletion of the contradiction between reality and play in the adulthood is also present in the satisfaction offered by humour.

It appears that grow up people cease to play. »But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another.... In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of playing, he now fantasies. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called daydreams«[10].

People's fantasies are less easy to observe than the play of children[10]. Children do not often play in front of the adults, but they do not hide their playing from them. »The adult, on the contrary, is ashamed of his fantasies and hides them from other people. He cherishes his fantasies as his most intimate possessions, and as a rule he would rather confess his misdeeds than tell anyone his fantasies. This difference in the behavior of a person who plays and a person who fantasies is accounted for by the motives of these two activities«[10].

A child's play is determined by wishes, in fact by one wish that also helps in the process of upbringing: it is the child's wish to be grown up and adult[10]. Children always play as if they were adults and imitate what they know about the life of their grown-ups. It is different with adults: on the one hand, they are aware of the fact that they are not continuing with playing of fantasying, but that they are acting in the real world; on the other hand, however, some of the wishes that result from fantasies are of the kind that should be concealed. Hence, adults are ashamed of their fantasies, and think of them as childish and often not allowed[10].

In Beyond the Pleasure Principle[11], Freud's psychoanalytic theory of play is demonstrated; play is here explicitly conceptualised as the repetition compulsion, whereby the child wishes to constantly repeat or »re-enact« an earlier observation, or rather an earlier experience. Freud[11] held that the leading manner in which the mind works is the pleasure principle – minimising or discharge of the instinctive tension resulting in pleasure. In Freud's[11] theory, the pleasure principle (of which play is an integral part) becomes replaced by the reality principle (both philogenetically and ontogenetically in case of an individual child) when the child's instincts give way to the reason. Play follows the pleasure principle, but it also serves – in an experimental way – the catching up of the path to reality. Play is the form of activity of the ego that tries to deal with the low level of anxiety emerging from the outer pressure and the inter-systemic conflicts. Its functions are seeking for satisfaction/pleasure and the defensive function, and it is used in the process of the development of sublimation. However, play is too close to instincts to be qualified as sublimation. Nevertheless, there are aspects of play that lead toward sublimation[11].

Briefly: from the point of view of instincts, play may be studied as a mixture of libido- and aggression-related aspirations, the aim of which is relief, without the need to take into account any real consequences or any reaction of the outer world, and therefore without any feeling of guilt caused by the reaction of the ego or the super-ego. If we follow the developmental line from early children's play to group play (game) and further to work, then we follow the line of an ever increasing acceptance of the reality principle. As Anna Freud[12] emphasised every developmental line overlaps to a certain extent with another, in order for a new developmental organisation and reorganisation to be created. There is often a chance to observe the overlapping of phases or co-existence of a conflict from one phase with the one from the next phase. Thus, children may play a game, and change the rules in accordance with their needs and wishes. Parents may share with the child the conviction of interconnection in the game, whilst indeed, the game has become the child's play. On the other hand, however, play may share some features with game. Rules that reflect the control of the ego and those that derive from the demands of the super-ego have been introduced. There

are toys, such as Lego or puzzle, which presume the child is able to analyse reality, and thus lead the child in towards work. This developmental line should be leading from the pre-play phase to the play by rules (game) and further to work[13].

The Understanding of Play after Freud

Peter Neubauer[14] emphasised that there were two interconnected components: the mental act and conscious and unconscious fantasies and wishes on the one hand, and the physical act transforming them into enactment that may be observed on the other. Nevertheless, these two components still do not make the differentiating play from work possible. In the play by rules (game), the idea or attempt to fulfil one's wish is also transformed into physical performance. Play has to have an additional quality, which may be marked as attempting, exploring, or trying to solve a problem in order to reach a new level of competence or developmental organisation.

On closer inspection, even this characteristic does not sufficiently differentiate play from work. A carpenter, an artist, or an inventor may work very hard endeavouring to find new solutions and experiments in action and thought, says Neubauer[14]. Accordingly, the one thing that seems self-evident should be pointed out, i.e. that an additional necessary characteristic of play is being aware that what is enacted is not real. An act or an action is performed at the level of symbolic meaning; nevertheless, as much as it may – at times – seem similar to reality, it still remains »play«. Let us presume a child knows its teddy bear is not a real being; or that the tower it builds and then destroys is not a real tower, nor is the destruction itself real.

However, the child's functioning at the pre-symbolic level is no play[14]. The following questions arise: at which moment during development does the child become capable of entering the world of play? At what age does the baby become conscious of the difference between wish and reality? Some authors suggest that a child's early practising of the ego apparatus serving development resembles work rather than play. The peek-a-boo play seems as the one preceding the game of hide-and-seek, the experimenting with loss and reunification, loss and return, accompanied by anxiety and the capability to anticipate events[14].

Play has three characteristics, according to Neubauer[14]: an expression of wishes and fantasies, the enactment of these wishes in search for fulfilment, and the consciousness of its being unreal. These characteristics play a role on the way toward reality, though it is at times difficult to differentiate real from unreal. Many variations are possible within the stage of translating fantasies into enactment. Wordplay and replacing actions with words may often result in obscuring the difference between words and actions.

In comparison with Freud's interpretation of play, Winnicott[15] reached a completely opposite conclusion. According to him, play almost lacks physical excitement based on the interference of instincts, or rather, when this interference becomes evident, play stops, or the enjoyment in playing is destroyed. Everything Winnicott[15] says of a child's playing is applicable to adults as well; the difference lies in the fact that adult playing is more difficult to describe since it mainly appears in the form of verbal communication. It becomes manifested in the choice of words, the modulation of the voice and the sense of humour. Winnicott[15] states that for him, playing assumed a new sense when he managed to comprehend the concept of transitional phenomena, from the early use of a transitional object to the final stage, the ability of a human being to experience a cultural event.

Transitioneen createdal phenomena are universal. Winnicott[15] speaks of transitional objects and transitional phenomena in the context of marking the intermediate area of experience: between thumb and the teddy-bear experience; between oral erotism and a real relationship; between the primary creative activity and the projection of the already introjected. The transitional object is neither an outer object nor an inner object (the latter is a mental concept); it is a possession, the first not-me. Winnicott[15] thus introduces the third area of life of a human being – the one marked as the intermediate area of experience to which both the inner (psychic) reality and the outer life contribute. This area is not challenged, since no demands are set upon it except that it should exist as a resting place for an individual involved in the constant task of separating the still mutually interconnected inner and outer reality. It stands between the subjective and the objectively observed, based on testing the reality.

Playing is neither inside nor outside; it is not a part of the refused not-me world, which is perceived by an individual as being completely outer, beyond its magical control. In order to be able to control the outer, a person needs to do something rather than merely think or wish; doing however requests time. Playing is doing. In other words, playing is set in a place and a time. The place represents potential space or the intermediate area of experience which is created between the baby and the mother, but only if the mother is »good enough mother«[11]. The mother's adaptation to the infant's needs, when good enough, gives the infant the illusion that there is an reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create. For example illusion that her breast is infant's creation, the part of his subjective world and under his magical control. In the beginning »good enough mother«[11] will be there that she could be found (her breast) by the infant. From the birth human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of. Transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusion without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being[15]. The mother's eventual task is gradually to disillusion the infant but she has no hope of success unless at first she has been able to give sufficient oppor-

tunity for illusion. It is assumed that the task of reality acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.) This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is »lost« in play[15].

Playing is universal and belongs to health; playing facilitates growth and hence health; playing leads to group relationships; it may be a form of communication; and finally, psychoanalysis has developed as a highly specialised form of playing with the aim of achieving communication with oneself and the others[15].

Among other functions of play in a child's development, the ability to play may play a significant role in the development of a child's mentalisation competence. The very young child uses two forms of psychic reality, which Target and Fonagy[16] have called »psychic equivalent« and »pretend« modes and which differ primarily in the assumed relationship between internal and external realities In a normal course of development, the child integrates these two modes in order to reach the stage of mentalisation or the reflective function in which mental states may be experienced as representations. The inner and the outer world may then be experienced as connected, and accepted regardless of their differences; the need for them to be equalised or separated (dissociate) ceases at that point.

Fonagy and Target[16] presume that mentalisation regularly develops through a child's perception that its mental states are thought about. A prototype for this may be found in the perception of safe games played with the parents or an older child, which fact facilitates the integration of two early reflective manners – the equalising and the converting – through an interpersonal process, which may be understood as the elaboration of a complex reflection offered to the infant by the guardian. During playing, the guardian offers the child's ideas and emotions (»when it only pretends«) a connection with reality, indicating to the existence of an alternative perspective, which is present outside the child's mind. Though the parent or the older child also demonstrates that reality may be twisted by the manner based on playing, the child may still face a real experience through this pretence in playing.

Safe commitment creates maximal emotional environment, within which a child is given the opportunity to reveal its intentional state, the capability of mentalisation or the theory of mind. To the contrary, unsafe commitment stands in negative correlation with performing tasks related to »the theory of mind« in five-year old children[17,18].

Neuroscientific Perception of Play

Neuroscientists confirm that the main shift in behaviour occurs at the end of the first year of infancy, and that this developmental shift is expressed in cognitive, motoric and affective spheres[19]. The observers of infant behaviour speak of the recognition of an abrupt maturing reorganisation of behaviour that occurs around the age of 12 months[20]. Mahler[21] describes the omnipotent excitement and the narcissistic elation (joy) of a young toddler, and observes that at this age, much more than at any other during development, »narcissism is at its peak«. The mother participates in the creation of high levels of the positive uncontrolled emotion (affect), which is a feature of the narcissistic state. Stern[22] points out that the harmonisation with the state of enthusiasm promotes the wished for and healthy feelings of omnipotence and grandiosity. Developmental psychoanalytic researchers notice that when the love affair with the world begins at the age of 10 to 12 months, narcissism is at its highest peak, and that the period of exercise offers the release into the »manic« excitement and the inclusion into the world far stronger than all the previously experienced unreliable givings …

Elation of the practicing period of the separation-individuation phase[21], high levels of arousal and eleveted activity level (boundless energy)[23], are all associated with heightened activation of the sympathetic component of the autonomic nervous system. Also, in various animal models it has been found, that young mammalians typically pass through a period of midinfancy in which they display a state of organismic hyperarousal and increased energy metabolism, especially when apart from the mother[24]. This state reflect unmodulated excitatory activity of early maturing reticular formation brain stem systems responsible for arousal[25].

It is well known that sympathetic and parasympathetic components have different schedules of development. The results of that are the unique physiological organizations at different stages of postnatal life. As early as 1931st famous British neurologist Hughlings Jackson[26] postulated that the infant will pass through an excitable stage in ontogenesis that is diminished by the later functional onset of cortical inhibitory centres. Luria[27] spoke about late maturing prefrontal inhibitory structures that hierarchically regulate early appearing excitation. Luria[27] later extended this concept by suggesting that development of adaptive regulatory structures occurs postnatally and is influenced by the social environment. Other researches in the early part of the twenty century have shown that spontaneous emotional expression is mainly subcortical and that cortical control is inhibitory[28]. These classical models are supported by contemporary research[19]. Newer studies of early development of biogenic amine systems, the neurochemical substrates of arousal, reveal an ontogenetic pattern of »inhibitory maturation« which counterbalances the infant's initial excitatory tendencies in motor activity and spontaneous motility[29].

The view that developing capacities are adaptive to the period in which they first emerge is completely in line with developmental biological concept of ontogenetic adaptation. Schore[19] propose that the affective, behavioral and cognitive aspects unique to the practicing period of

the separation-individuation phase[21], reflect a biologically limited period of sympathetic-dominant limbic hyperarousal and behavioral overexcitation which have adaptive significance in the practicing socioenvironmental niche«[19]. The same author continues: »Neo-toddler's hyperactivity and high rates of positive affects that result from the hyperarousal represent such ontogenetic adaptations«. Pine[30] believes that the elated, constantly moving toddler who seems as someone who is filled with boundless energy may correspond to the defintion of infant active play. Kagan reports that at 10 months fully 90% of maternal physical and verbal behaviour consists of affection, play, and caregiving, with only 5% involved in prohibiting the child from ongoing activity[31]. Developmental observers have noted that by 1 year –age stimulation-seeking exploratory play time increase to as much as 6 hours of the child day.

Some authors underscores the adaptive aspect of early play. By altering the relationship of the young organism to its developmental environment, play in effect makes the environment an »enriched« one[19]. Play behavior may thus reflect the phase specific heightened activation of an exploratory-assertive motivational system[32]. Tucker[33] proposed the general principle: The ability to participate in processes of play and affectional interaction may be a key determinant of both information flow and the brain arousal that help to shape developing networks.

In most primates, prior social isolation has a devastating effect on the urge to play[34]. Their basic needs for social warmth, support and affiliation must be fulfilled first; only when confidence has been restored does carefree playfulness return. According to Panksepp[34] in spite of that there exist substantial diversity in the specific play patterns exhibited by different mammalian species, the evolutionary roots probably go back to an ancient PLAY circuitry shared by all mammalians in essentially homologous fashion. In human research several distinct forms of play are recognized. Human play has been divided by social and developmental psychologists into exploratory/sensorimotor play, relational/functional play, constructive play, dramatic/symbolic play, and games- with-rules play, as well as RAT play. This last form, rough-and-tumble play, is presently easiest to study in animal models, but in human research it has received the least attention. Although human play has been extensively taxonomized, it is still worth contemplating to what extent the various forms are merely higher elaborations (culturally derived, as well as higher neuroevolutionary variants) on a single primal theme[34]. It appears that it will take time to answer the many different questions concerning the human play.

Conclusion

Neuroscience offers an exact confirmation for a fact that philosophers, educators, psychoanalysts, developmental psychologists and many psychotherapists had recognised long before: play stimulates the development of cognitive and emotional abilities; and its therapeutic value is based thereupon. D. W. Winnicott (1971) explicitly summarised its function and importance as follows: »It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that individual discovers the self«.

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O IGRI I IGRANJU

S A Ž E T A K

U radu se daje pregled razvoja koncepta igre i igranja. Teorije igre počele su se u pravom smislu razvijati tek od 19 st. Igru je teško definirati i lakše se njezinoj definiciji pristupa preko onoga što ona nije, nije rad. Igra je najprije bila povezivana s obrazovanjem, a tek se u Freudovoj psihoanalitičkoj teoriji i Piagetovoj razvojnoj psihologiji počeo detaljnije objašnjavati značaj igre za razvoj djeteta. Navodi se i uloga igre u odrasloj dobi. Detaljnija pažnja posvećena je psihodinamskim, odnosno psihoanalitičkim autorima, a naročito D. W. Winnicottu i njegovom shvaćanju igranja u intermedijanom (prijelaznom) prostoru iskustva, ili doživljavanja. Igranje, drugim riječima ima svoj »prostor i vrijeme«. Također se navodi nuroznanstveno gledanje na igru, također u funkciji razvoja.