
The Elements of Play

Toward a Philosophy and a Definition of Play



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Scholars conventionally find play difficult to define because the concept is complex and ambiguous. The author proffers a definition of play that takes into consideration its dynamic character, posits six basic elements of play (anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise), and explores some of their emotional, physical, and intellectual dimensions. He argues for a play ethos that recognizes play is evolution based and developmentally beneficial. He insists, however, that, at its most elemental, play always promises fun. In this context, any activity that lacks these six elements, he contends, will not fully qualify as play. **Key words:** definition of play; elements of play; universe of play

PLAY IS A ROOMY SUBJECT, broad in human experience, rich and various over time and place, and accommodating pursuits as diverse as peekaboo and party banter, sandlot baseball and contract bridge, scuba diving and Scrabble. Play welcomes opposites, too. Play can be free—ungoverned by anything more complicated than choosing which stick is best to improvise a light saber—or fixed and codified, as in those instances when soccer players submit to scrupulous “laws.” Play can take active or passive form and can be vicarious or engaging—and so we recognize play in both the spectator and the actor. In fact, at play we may even become both spectator *and* actor, straining with an air-guitar at a concert for example or sympathetically enacting the motions of the quarterback’s long bomb during the big game.¹ We have no trouble recognizing play in the premeditated prank or the instant wisecrack. And then play can be solitary or social—as enjoyed by a woodcarver at his bench or a quilter during her bee. We can find play in the spaces in between, too, as children engage imaginary friends without quite being alone or as gamers play together on the Internet without meeting face-to-face.

We can take in play at a glance in these instances, following its course and knowing it confidently when we see it, but observation does not automatically

bring us closer to refining the concept. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case: the settings change, the play interval varies, the intensity rises and falls, and then intent and other human circumstances shift and morph. The more we look and listen, the more we feel our confidence slip away. But if our eyes fail us, perhaps the mind can compensate. Can we imagine a satisfying definition, one true of play wherever and whenever there are players and however they play? Can we specify ideal, unvarying, dependable attributes of play?

Many thinkers have proposed so, noting salient aspects of play. Gordon Burghardt, for example, in his searching *The Genesis of Animal Play* (2005), identified twelve characteristics of play. And Thomas Henricks, in his thoughtful *Play Reconsidered* (2006), noted that scholars have tended to isolate volition, pretending, ordering, seclusion, and secrecy.² Boil the lists down, and five basic qualities emerge: play is apparently purposeless, voluntary, outside the ordinary, fun, and focused by rules. Identifying the attributes of play like this can prove very useful if we understand them as criteria, and once having so identified these criteria, apply them as standards.

Thus, first, play exists for its own sake. Players do not aggressively seek out some other purpose to play. In fact, trying to twist play to an end vitiates it, making it seem less and less like play. Second, players play of their own accord. Third, play is special and set apart. Sometimes players reserve a particular setting for playing, and no matter how different from each other, the field, the stadium, the woods, the rink, the court, and the ring all serve as playgrounds. Fourth, play is fun, a criterion not so simple as it sounds because people can find fun in a dizzying variety of activities. And fifth, players play by rules. Rules are not just for organizing games and making them fair, they keep games interesting and keep games going. But rules will vary widely in their stringency too— whether promulgated like the two-hundred-forty-page paperbound Official Rules of the National Football League or noisily negotiated in a neighborhood pick-up game.

Any activity that fails to meet one or more of the criteria violates the standards of play and helps us sort that which is play from that which is not. So, for example, we find it hard to imagine an activity that is overly purposeful, compulsory, ordinary, unpleasant, or random as play. We may play at Sudoku, but we toil at double-entry bookkeeping. Competitive marksmanship counts as play, but the same cannot be said of a firing squad. Anxiously waiting for a bus cannot claim anything for play, but passing the time whistling a version of Van Morrison's "Moondance" while waiting for the same bus surely can. Whether we consider something play or not can be a matter of degree, too. Marching

can be fun for children playing at soldiering and for the wild hybrid of dance and chanted free verse of inner-city drill teams. But real soldiers marching to imminent war are no more playful than gunplay is play.

Unfortunately for our purposes, the criteria of the Burghardt and Henricks lists and the standards they establish do not always provide ironclad tests of play. The trouble begins with the first criterion. Play may appear purposeless yet hold an abiding utility or deeper, more contingent objectives. Because children pretend at adult roles and tasks, scholars sometimes allege that play is preparatory and therefore functions as a rehearsal.³ Some may find the correlation too extravagant because the numbers who play at being fireman or spacemen or princesses and fairy queens is small or tiny compared to the numbers who will actually one day explore space or gather a retinue of ladies-in-waiting. They would argue that the connection is so remote as to be suspect. But the mistake here may more truly lie in trying to read play both too literally and too symbolically. The skills the players learn will have nothing per se to do with maneuvering in space or at court and everything to do with learning fancy footwork, tolerance, and empathy, all necessary for moving with ease among playmates but also useful in later life no matter what they do.⁴

The exceptions to the last criterion prove as problematic and instructive as the troubles with the first. Rule making also includes rule breaking, ironically, as operating obediently within artificial constraint and restriction unearths bones of contention that invite players to vault the obstacles or dispute the conditions that every game imposes. Thus subversion and mischief often become part of the experience and parcel of the fun. In fact, play will lurch between regulation and abandon, order and disorder, or contain both forces at once.⁵

Can Play Be Defined?

Even if a list of attributes such as ours could be entirely clearcut, however, to make an inventory of traits is not truly to define play any more than to say “a rose smells sweet” defines a rose. Knowing how you perceive a rose and how you react to a rose is not to say what a rose is. The same is true of how we perceive and react to play. Indeed the *Oxford English Dictionary* (O.E.D.) presents five, dense, three-column pages of definitions and usages of play and still manages not to exhaust the subject. Play is “diversion” and “pretense.” Play is “exercise,” according to the *O.E.D.*; play is “free and unimpeded movement;” play is “a

boiling up,” play is “any brisk activity.” To “deliver blows” counts as play, so does “trifling with words,” “dalliance,” and going “on strike.” To “flit and flutter” and to “frolic” is to play, to “abstain from work” is play, to “strut” is to play, and to “clap with the hands” is play. Play is “capricious,” “brisk,” “lively,” and “irregular.” The word appears as a transitive and intransitive verb, as a noun, and as an adjective. The word describes actions, the lack of action, and attitudes. The definitions encompass both causes and effects. When coupled with other words, play conveys a surprising assortment of meanings. To play on words is to manipulate them, to play off is to react to, to play with is to join or to manipulate, to play out is to follow through. To play up is to step up to the plate with teeth gritted. To play down is to minimize. To play “possum” is to disguise yourself.⁶ To play it cool is to chill out.

We can see, then, why it is not so hard to identify play as to settle on a definition of it. The very abundance of definitions makes choosing among them difficult; more than one expert has termed the enterprise “futile.”⁷ But the real problem lies in that play is not susceptible to definition in the way we might define an automobile as “a four wheeled powered vehicle for transporting passengers and things.” And, at its most maddeningly imprecise, play becomes an evaluative and emotive term such as “art” or “love,” carrying social, moral, and aesthetic freight that adds to the challenge of defining the word and the concept.

Perhaps we could more safely argue for play as an aspect—and a function of—human development. Play plainly offers a mix of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual rewards at all stages of life. Psychiatrist and play advocate Stuart Brown, for example, argues that play is surely practice for the body, exercise for the feelings, and training for the mind.⁸ Play makes us more interesting and better adjusted in social circumstances; it is education for the public self. We are undeniably fitter and quicker when we play, and we are measurably duller and edgier when we do not. Play helps us blow off steam.

But here again, to try to define play by naming its functions or listing its beneficial effects would be like trying to define art by where we hang it or by counting the brush strokes on a canvas. To bring a quantitative approach to a qualitative task would be to miss the point badly.

Does Play Really Need Defining?

If we fall short in trying to understand play by listing its attributes, if functional

definitions leave us wanting for more, and if tabulating play's benefits fails as definition, should we be content to leave it at that? The great Dutch theorist of play Johann Huizinga wrote in 1938 "if we call the active process that makes up the essence of play instinct, we say nothing; if we call it 'mind' or 'will,' we say too much."⁹ A vast space remains blank in the middle. Why not learn to live with haziness and plurality? In real life, after all, we forgive much that is mysterious or ill defined and are most of the time more or less content not to poke under the hood of other elusive concepts that drive us. Time, matter, the self, identity, sustainability, intelligence, and national security are among many unreliably defined and uncertain concepts familiar to us, but we accommodate their wickedness in conversation and casual use. We wind our watches, dig our gardens, sign our names, recycle soda cans, send our children to school, and submit to airport security screening without stopping to examine the fuzzy ideas that support our actions. So why should we care to patrol the porous and disputed borders of play? "Play is one of those elusive phenomena that can never be contained within a systematic scholarly treatise," argues Mihai I. Spariosu, a professor of comparative literature and a student of European philosophy. "Play transcends all disciplines, if not all discipline," he noted wryly.¹⁰

For the widely ranging folklorist and play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, the difficulty in defining play arises from this very transcendence. Play for Sutton-Smith proved difficult to define because it is plagued by a series of pesky overlapping subproblems: the vagueness and imprecision of the term itself, the confusions that spring from the specialized languages and approaches that academic disciplines live by, and the competing ideological and ethical assumptions about play. It only seems possible to grab and describe a piece of the subject at a time, we slip into comfortable ways of talking about play thereby, but meanwhile the whole remains indefinable. Sutton-Smith approached categorizing play as a problem of literary analysis in a landmark study *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997) that divided fundamental ways of looking at play into "rhetorics," a word he coined for the purpose.¹¹ These rhetorics proved not to be all of the same kind, however. They included imposing philosophical terms such as "progress," "power," "fate," and "frivolity;" specific psychological and therapeutic approaches such as "identity" and "the self;" and headings derived from episodes from the lives of growing children—"child phantasmagoria," "child play," and "child power and identity."

According to Sutton-Smith, these different rhetorics led play scholars and play practitioners to talk past each other in ways that sometimes create insuper-

able snags. But while insider discourse that requires translation is bothersome enough, Sutton-Smith noticed a deeper, more unyielding problem. Most of these rhetorics are so laden with value, so knotted with the zeitgeist, and so closely invested in programs, curricula, or therapeutic protocols they could not be trusted. And since play could not be decoupled from its rhetorics, the subject itself remained deeply ambiguous. Of course, ambiguity also stood in the way of trustworthy definition.

If there may be no remedy for the way play fails to outgrow disciplines and their discourses and current climates of opinion, there may yet be something in the wandering nature of play that points to its essence. Two years after publishing *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith detected a glimmer of hope for a definition in the drift and imprecision itself. Play, though elusive, could be defined by its course, its content, its effects, and the way it is marked off in “genres.” He offered this definition: “Play, as a unique form of adaptive variability, instigates an imagined but equilibrial reality within which disequilibrial exigencies can be paradoxically simulated and give rise to the pleasurable effects of excitement and optimism. The genres of such play are humor, skill, pretense, fantasy, risk, contest, and celebrations, all of which are selective simulations of paradoxical variability.”¹²

The definition is circular, incomplete, and difficult to unpack. But note the salient features: play is inimitable, it takes place in an imagined if unsteady reality, and it is marked by pleasing effects that include optimism. Play will thrive on players’ wit or courage. And it is possible to observe play in contests and celebrations.

Trying to define play encourages scholars to retire to their own corners, and thereafter its definition easily threatens to become a disquisition of enlarged, *O.E.D.* proportions. For example, we could easily argue that the mixed “genres” of play that Sutton-Smith reasonably singles out—humor, skill, pretense, fantasy, risk, contest, and celebrations—should be expanded to include exploration and discovery, speculation, deception, role reversal, playful startling, socializing, learning, collecting and assembling, synchronizing, cooperating, synthesizing, balancing, and tracking. These attributes and effects (though not exclusive to playing) usually make play easy to recognize, but they, like the three approaches we began with, do not move us much closer to a definition. We could double the items in the list and double them again and still be entitled to ask “what is this thing we call play?” Or, if the exercise begins to feel exasperating, “so what the hell is play, anyway?”

So What, If Anything, Is Play?

When we set off on the trail of a definition, the most obscure language that Sutton-Smith offers also proves the most suggestive. References to “adaptive variability” and “selective simulations” at the beginning and end suggest that it is best not to think of play as a thing, at all—like a car that speeds or a rose that smells sweet—but as a series of connected events. In this respect, play resembles a revolution, or a journey, or growth, or acceleration, or other processes that unfold and move along at varying rates.

Most approaches to studying play do not account for movement, change, and process. In fact, though, the process of unfolding in the direction of order supplies the most useful trope for framing play. Sometimes play depends on a deep bodily and social attunement to create that order. The journalist Alma Guillermopreito, once a student of Martha Graham’s and later a dance teacher herself, describes how graceful dancers “seek the roots of each movement within their bodies.”¹³ Hockey and soccer players flow on ice and field like fish in a school reacting together and, as the NHL player and coach Saul Miller noted, “thinking smooth.”¹⁴ Successful teammates anticipate each others’ moves almost as if they share one mind.

Even a lone player undergoes a process. The individual storyteller, for example, in a direction that the author and kindergarten teacher Vivian Paley calls “an open-ended dialogue with oneself and the community,”¹⁵ rides a wave of narrowing possibility that (even accounting for the wild oscillations and scattered symbolism in children’s stories) leans spontaneously toward meaning and symbolism.

Luckily, self-organizing processes of the kind that characterize play have been spotted elsewhere. Cosmologists, particle physicists, mathematicians, neuroscientists, evolutionary and cellular biologists, meteorologists, animal behaviorists, fashion critics, political philosophers, economists, urban historians, psychiatrists and psychotherapists, composers, video game designers, software engineers, and systems analysts encounter processes that out of their own resources and over time gather shape and structure spontaneously. They observe and study phenomena grouped under the term “emergence,” which management theorist Jeffrey Goldstein calls “the arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties, during the process of self-organization in complex systems.”¹⁶

Emergent systems grow from simple rules and straightforward exchanges. Still, they can take on startlingly complex forms. The towering termite “cathe-

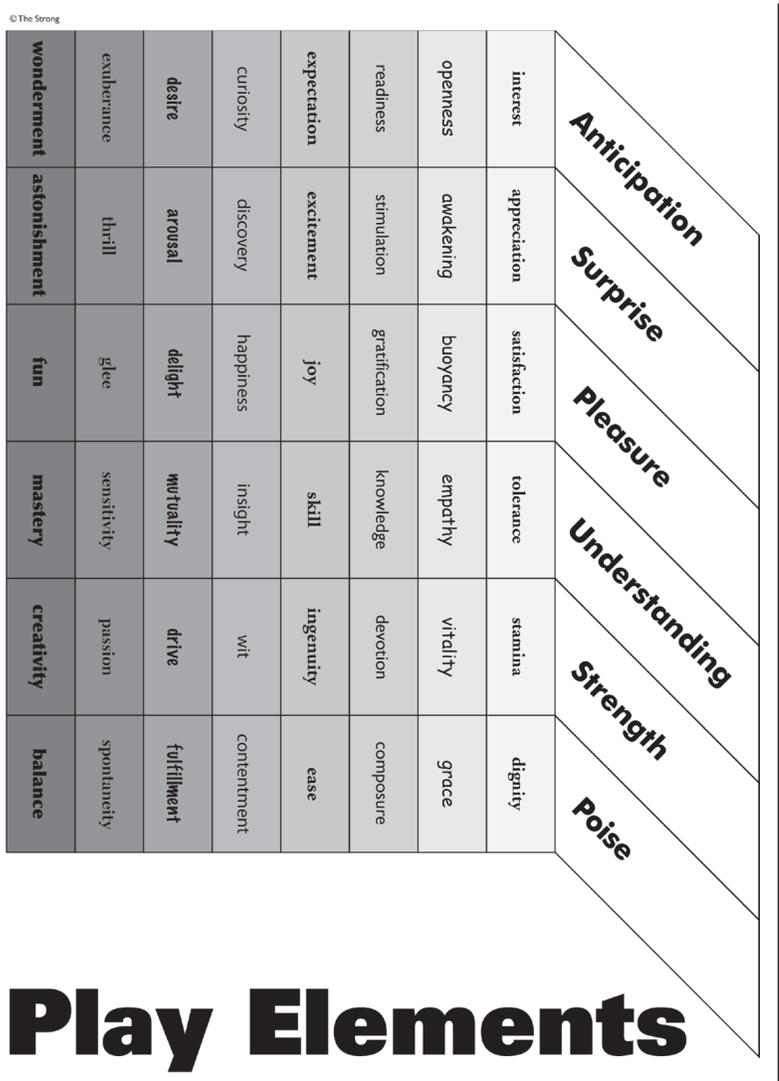


Figure 1. Play Elements presented as a linear sequence. Find a full-color downloadable version of this chart at www.museumofplay.org/play-elements.

drals” that dot Australia’s Kakadu National Park materialize not out of a grand design or a colonial instinct for Gothic architecture among insects, but from the simple rule that excavated material will stack up and stick together close to the entrance to the colony. A growing city ungoverned by zoning laws will obey similar rules of construction and “rise up” as William Wordsworth once put it, like a “monstrous ant-hill on the plain.”¹⁷

Play, again, is one of these processes. The “adaptive variability” in Sutton-Smith’s definition of play makes for half of the tale of emergent systems; the other half is self-organization. Play grows on fields and in woods, on playroom floors, neighborhood pavements, and backyard playgrounds; and play organizes in stadiums, rinks, courts, and rings. In all these places and many others, disparate elements assemble into a process that comprises play.

The Elements of Play

Six basic elements, bolstered here and there by current cognitive psychology and neuroscience, emerge and unfold to cover the field of play—anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. We should not reify these elements, taking them as things in themselves. Instead, we should read the elements as conveniences, as manners of speaking, and above all, as moving images more akin to concepts in aesthetics and philosophy. For the sake of clarity, the chart in figure 1 renders the elements of play as a linear process. But, of course, play is not linear, and we will have more to say about that later. For now, read across the rows to see how the elements unfold in play. Each element takes on explanatory power as it subdivides into eight “expressions,” synonyms of varying potency. Scan the columns of the chart downward to see how a single element increases in intensity.

Play begins in anticipation, in an imaginative, predictive, pleasurable tension.¹⁸ We usually sidle into play after having looked forward to it, after having prepared ourselves for it: the picture puzzle begs for completion; the fly rod beckons. To prepare for play is to begin to play; to ready for play is already to be at play. In all play, there is an instant or an interval that separates what had not been from what soon will be play. Players know and look forward to the keen moment that announces play’s arrival—when the neighborhood kids knock at the door, for instance, or as the dealer shuffles and cuts a deck of cards, when the referee’s whistle blows or a school bell rings recess, or when the starter shouts

“Ready, set. . . .” At the other end of the scale, by long practice at anticipation, the professional tennis player waiting in the interval for the one-hundred-miles per hour serve improves significantly on the half-second delay that normal humans take to react. At this moment or during this interval, our interest narrows and our mind focuses. We imagine what happens next. Play begins with a disposition to play. This state of readiness, of anticipation, whether mild or intense, already feels rewarding as it makes way for play.

Anticipation gives way to the next element, surprise, when, as Charles Darwin observed, the “novel or incongruous idea breaks through a habitual train of thought.”¹⁹ We can hear people at play if we listen for the laughter. Hilarity bubbles to the surface of play when incongruity breaks through. A game of peekaboo is front loaded with the pleasures of anticipation and surprise. Children demand repeat performances of the peeker and laugh without fail when she says “boo!” yet again. To laugh at that which we have prepared for seems a paradox, but, in fact, it is nothing of the sort. The apparent paradox merely points out the relationship of anticipation to surprise. Because memory and prediction share a neural substrate, players in a state of anticipation may be “remembering” a future pleasure.²⁰ Surprise is itself a reward, but it is a reward that we must first be prepared to appreciate. Players keep play fresh by choosing up equal sides, by negotiating rules that handicap the strongest or most skilled players or positions, and by introducing technologies that allow peak performances. Players prolong and perpetuate play by helping ensure it is open-ended.

Curiosity, a form of anticipation, leads to discovery, a dividend of play. Curiosity urges a young naturalist onward, for example, and the happy, first discovery of a well-known species may hold the bug collector at the hobby for a lifetime, perhaps turning it into a profession. In fact, nearly every professional entomologist began as a bug collector. Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist who studied social insects and coined the term “sociobiology,” admitted that he had never outgrown the pleasures of his own “bug period.” In his boyhood in Washington DC, the exhibits and collections at the National Museum of Natural History and the National Zoo took only a nickel fare on a streetcar. There, Wilson encountered the new and exciting at every turn and found himself “lost in dreams of distant jungles and savannahs.”²¹

Pleasure, the third element, functions as the keystone or hub of play, both as a defining trait and an incentive to play some more. As we play, pleasure mixes with anticipation, surprise, understanding, strength, and—if we are lucky—

poise. While playing, we experience pleasure in intensifying shades of satisfaction, buoyancy, gratification, joy, happiness, delight, glee and fun. Play would not be playful if it were not fun. And because pleasure offers its own reward and because play entails pleasure, play perpetuates itself. We would not play if play were not, at least in some measure, fun.

But pleasure is mostly momentary. “Pleasure passes like a fleeting shade,” Voltaire reminded us.²² This is another reason why pleasure applies more easily to play—a process rather than a static thing. Pleasure drives play. Locate anticipation and notice how expectation or desire both entail pleasure and promise it. Scan down from surprise, and note that discovery and thrill do not just lead to pleasure. Again, they comprise pleasurable feelings themselves. Understanding points to insight and sensitivity as rewards of play. When we understand strength as devotion or creativity, we feel the power of this sort as pleasure. And the luckiest players experience poise in increasing dimensions of dignity, grace, composure, ease, wit, fulfillment, spontaneity, and balance—all pleasurable feelings.

By investing us in play and by inviting us to play some more, pleasure enlarges the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dividends that accrue. We appreciate the last three elements of play—understanding, strength, and poise—as physical, intellectual, emotional, and social pleasures. Other avenues present themselves as paths toward education, vigor, and self-assurance, but none is quite so much fun as play. We play because it is fun, to be sure, but we reap short- and long-term benefits thereby mostly unknowingly. As Karl Groos, the pioneering observer of play, put it, “Animals cannot be said to play because they are young and frolicsome, but *rather they have a period of youth in order to play.*”²³

Understanding, the fourth element, delivers emotional and intellectual bonuses—enlarging both our talent for empathy and our capacity for insight. Play with others requires mutuality and sensitivity; these gifts are preconditions and credentials for play. They also emerge at an amazingly early phase of our development. Erik Erikson noted the “playful and yet ‘planful’ dialog” between infant and mother “that negotiates the first interpersonal encounters, the light of the eyes, the features of the face, and the sound of the name, become essential ingredients of a first recognition of and by the primal other.”²⁴ Play stirs initially in these mutual exchanges,²⁵ in the attunement between mother and infant that contains the first three elements of play, anticipation, surprise, and then contagious pleasure in the form of unmistakable mutual delight.

Understanding proceeds from the pleasure of this dialog. Later, as toddlers begin to develop a “theory of mind” and a theory of how others generate

theories, playing also helps sensitize them to the intentions of others.²⁶ Group play soon after sharpens our appreciation of the utility of fairness, and, without it, we will suffer. Instances of severe play deprivation that have come to the attention of medical authorities and social workers—from isolated cases of child abuse to occasions of scandalous national neglect (of Rumanian and Serbian orphans, for example), show that we cannot easily attain our full growth of mutual understanding without play and other kinds of human contact.²⁷ Understanding deepens as children learn to play together. Understanding of both sorts—empathy and knowledge—also feeds back into play. At the same time that tolerance, mutuality, and sensitivity flow from play, these resources also instruct play, making it richer, more complex, and once again, more pleasurable.

The fifth element, strength—strength of mind and of body—flows from understanding. Play trains our physical skills, sharpens our mental abilities, and deepens our insights into our social capabilities. This fifth element of play is the easiest element to caricature: the circus strongman can pull a semi with his teeth; the comic book super hero can leap tall buildings with a single bound. We picture bulging muscles and blinding speed and think that we know about strength. But defining real strength as a dividend of play may be as fully challenging as defining play itself, not because we are paralyzed by apparent contradictions and ambiguity but, again, because the subject is so rich. Real-life feats of strength require that one must be flexible enough to be resilient, ingenious enough to avoid the rough spots, and lively enough to bend without breaking.

Players garner strength in the form of mastery and control. They often surprise themselves. The young soccer player who stops a ball with her left foot and, in a split second, kicks it with her right is thinking ahead about passing the ball to a forward across the field and setting up a goal. This complicated rumba at top speed teaches her the value of anticipation. The play makes demands of her neural and muscular systems for that moment, but the lessons last a lifetime. When we play on words, solve puzzles, choose sides, or sing silly songs, we enlarge our working vocabularies, practice and stimulate our sense of numbers and proportions, train our wit, maintain our friendships, augment our sense of fairness, and exercise our feeling for rhythm.²⁸ Because play offers the “the empowerment of coming through a scary experience unscathed,” as Stuart Brown puts it, playing steels us against fear and pain.²⁹ Fantasy monsters that incarnate our fears are there for the slaying; while playing we also play down such physical discomforts as breathlessness, weariness, dizziness, side stitches, and muscle strain. In this way, feats of strength often become acts of devotion, drive, and passion.

Much of the pleasure we derive from play is social in nature, and play strengthens our social skills. Play propagates itself in our close groups, strengthening old acquaintanceships and rewarding us with new friendships. These bonds shore up our societies with common associations, common experiences, and common purposes. Playing also deliberately rearranges our relationships and so enhances our social wit. At play we learn to read others' intentions. And by playing we learn to deflect and defuse conflict. This is how play contributes to our composure and ease, and this composure, in turn, spreads to our social circles. Friendliness and the appearance of joy are attractive qualities, and those who we attract will return the favor by making us happier. The disagreeable and hesitant, on the other hand, will more likely be left alone. A more confident and more accommodating social self, a stronger self, also makes us more attractive as playmates and partners. Wit, ingenuity, creativity, drive, and passion, all expressions of strength, advertise that we stand poised for the unexpected.

When play adds understanding to strength, the product is poise, the sixth and final element of play. And here I am intentionally avoiding the less inclusive term that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi made famous—"flow"—because, although successful play often delivers an engrossing suspension of the sense of the passage of time,³⁰ it provides much more. Play reserves poise as a reward for the luckiest players who experience increasing dimensions of dignity, grace, composure, ease, wit, fulfillment, and spontaneity. These expressions of poise are social, plainly, but they extend to the physical, too. We know the five senses well, but understanding play in its physical and social dimensions requires adding one more sense—the sense of balance.

Thinking of balance in physical terms leads us to the way play pleurably enhances proprioception—the awareness of our bodies in space, the dynamic sense of the relation of the parts as players control the wayward arms and the hands, the legs and the feet, and the head and the trunk and bring them in close relationship to the whole. At play, "the body remembers what the mind has forgotten," Stuart Brown observes.³¹ Proprioceptive awareness supplies the feedback that allows us to jump a rope or climb a tree. And balance also includes the tracking or ocularmotor sense that allows us to return a Ping-Pong serve or grind a skateboard down the steep banister. Our sense of balance dulls over time, alas. The proprioceptors in our feet become less effective, our muscles weaken, and the hairs in our inner ears become less sensitive, providing inferior-quality information to the vestibular system that keeps us upright. So physicians in

nursing homes prescribe play to enhance balance because a fall at an advanced age can lead to fatal fractures. Play trains the body in this way and others. But it also feeds the mind, shores up the feelings, and tutors good social judgment—making us better rounded and more attractive. Besides the physical profit, we acknowledge the benefits of poise in intellectual, emotional, and social ways. The dividends pay out as expressions of poise—again as dignity, ease, contentment, fulfillment, spontaneity, and balance.

And this may provide a hint as to why play has survived in us despite its social risks and physical dangers. Players' genes may well tend to be favored in succeeding populations. Given the uncertainty and threat that ruled most human societies for most of human history, conspicuously consuming play, boldly advertising a sense of spontaneity, and prominently displaying a knack for delight must have seemed attractive qualities back then as they do now. Perhaps a talent for play shows prospective mates that players are poised for the unexpected and ready to respond gracefully and creatively to what is in store.³²

Because other mammals play, it is exceedingly unlikely that this talent arose spontaneously in our own species as a feature of our exclusive property right. No, play is widely shared and adaptive and, in fact, has enhanced the survival of our graduating class—mammals—over the very long haul. Jaak Panksepp, the founder of the discipline of affective neuroscience, and his colleagues discovered that frisky rats laugh while they wrestle (much as we humans do) and will wither socially if deprived of play. We last shared a common ancestor with them nearly seventy-five million years ago. The antiquity of play only deepens the sense of play as both fundamental and necessary.³³

What Is Not Play?

Imagine play as a spinning galaxy or a pyrotechnic pinwheel spiraling head-on in your direction. The elements—anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise—hug the center of rotation closely. But also picture an imaginary line swirling from each of the elements as a scale that slides into its opposite. Hold on to the delicious, playful sense of anticipation too long and too tightly, for example, and expectation trails off into fixation and obsession. Captain Ahab had not sailed out sport fishing. Anticipation may be safely tinged with apprehension and still be edgy and playful,³⁴ but too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing. Feeding a roll of nickels into the one-armed bandit sup-

plies harmless entertainment front loaded with keen anticipation; but betting next week's paycheck on the roulette wheel courts disaster.

Players want to be stirred, not shaken. They take pleasure in a pleasant surprise but do what they can to avoid a disagreeable shock. And they never mistake a disagreeable shock for play. Slapstick is surprising and funny, for example, especially from afar. But up close we know the difference between a pratfall and a compound fracture. The difference between a prankster and a tormenter is plain to see, too. Roller coasters will extract squeals from their riders, and Alfred Hitchcock thought of his movies—even *Psycho*—as comedies even as their dizzying plots flirted with the creepy or the terrifying.³⁵ We navigate this apparent paradox easily because we allow ourselves the surprises we prepare ourselves for. It is not necessary to explain how pleasure can descend into wretched excess; the cardinal sins are mostly offenses of hurtful overindulgence. Ungrounded understanding, too, no matter how studiously pursued, may travel toward paralysis and indecision. Strength may drive toward heedlessness. And even poise, if not reinvigorated with anticipation, can fade to abstraction and dreaminess.

A final contrast: we can tell the difference between somebody who wants to play and somebody who lies in wait. Children are often better at making this distinction than adults are because their experiences are recent and their need for protection more urgent. A bully does not greet us with the open, inviting expression that a player will. He does not show the “play face” that evolution has given us as a universal invitation.³⁶ We know what is on the bully's mind by reading his intentions in his feral grin. The bully's rictus provides the age-old cue: glee tinged with cruelty is not play. And crucially, it is not that the bully—male or female—has gone over to the “dark side” of play; it is that the bully just does not “get” play in the first place. (Strictly speaking, play has no dark side; if it is dark and incapable of trending toward poise, we have no good reason to lump it with play. And further, conceptually, “dark play” suffers as an oxymoron bordering on a “category mistake” the way semantic errors like “kind cruelty” or “dull witticisms” do.) Likely, the bully as a survivor of abuse has been made to feel powerless in damaging ways. This is not to discount or excuse the perverse pleasure he derives from tormenting his peers or his juniors but only to trace the way his bullying evidences pain seeking rather than pleasure seeking.³⁷ Our instinctual recognition of the bully as distinct from the player helps us round out a definition for play. Bullying is neither purposeless nor joyful. Bullying is not play for its own sake. Neither can bullying tend toward empathy or composure because its sources arise invariably in aggression and pain rather than anticipation and joy. Bullying flunks the attributes test for play.

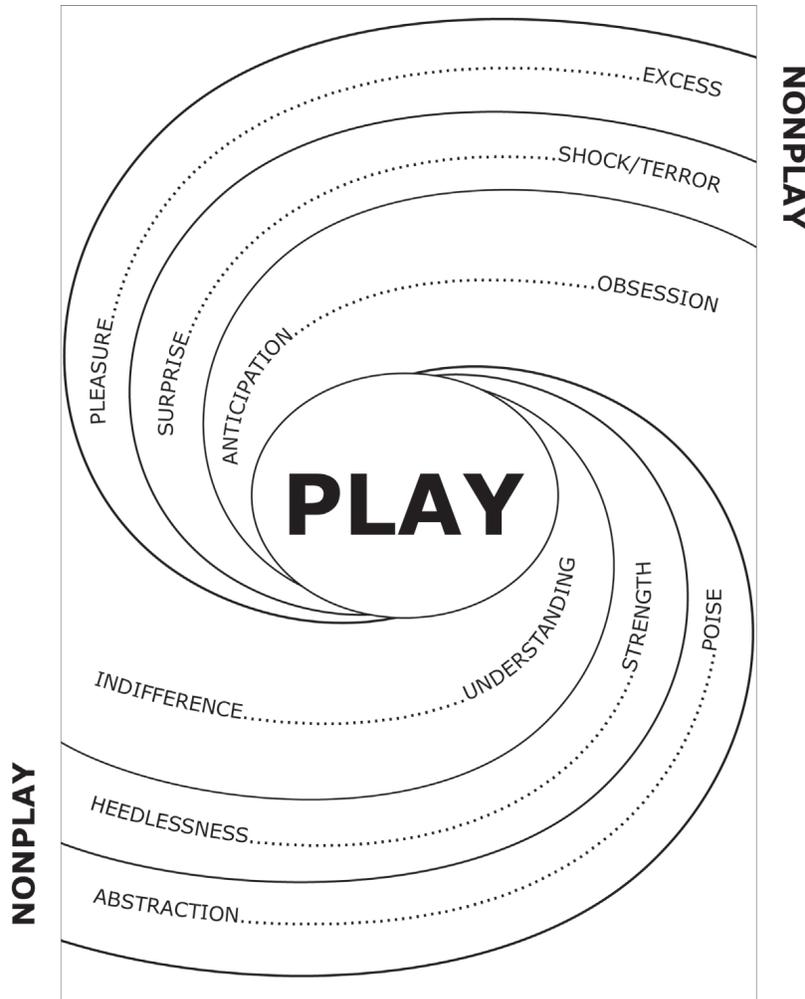


Figure 2. Play and nonplay

A Definition for Play

Once we observe an activity that is purposeless, voluntary, outside the ordinary, fun, and defined by rules, we arrive at the moment of truth. To distinguish play from its fellow travelers as well as its opposites, we need to extract a working definition for play that accounts for play as an event that unfolds spontane-

ously (but not randomly), that notices the volition of the participants (but still accounts for both rule making and rule breaking), and that recognizes its benefits (while acknowledging the risks). This definition needs to preserve the sense that any individual play event is embedded in a social, psychological, and historical matrix. And the definition must remember that it is not possible to extract play from player's viewpoints or intentions: play cannot be pulled away from where and when and with whom it takes place.

It may help to imagine play both rotating and revolving like a Tilt-a-Whirl thrill ride as in figure 3. Picturing play as an emergent self-feeding process where causes and effects are linked shows how anticipation leads to the kind of surprise that gives rise to pleasure which enlarges understanding, which in turn builds strength (of mind, body, or character), which contributes to the poise that again enables our anticipation. It is as if a play event sits on a platform, where each element spins on its own axis as the whole corkscrews through time.

Wheels spin within wheels in this diagram that appears more as a field of possibility and less as a linear certainty. Play changes with time and place and as culture changes. Play changes as individual people mature, too, and as their experiences add complexity to play. Remove an individual disk from the spiral, and you have an individual moment of play. Set it running forward, and you have a picture of play over time.

We could slice out one disk from a point in the spiraling process and still recognize the relationship of the elements within play and thus describe a snapshot of the current relations of play. But we can also arrange a series of these disks (or snapshots) in order, animate the process, and flip or spiral them in

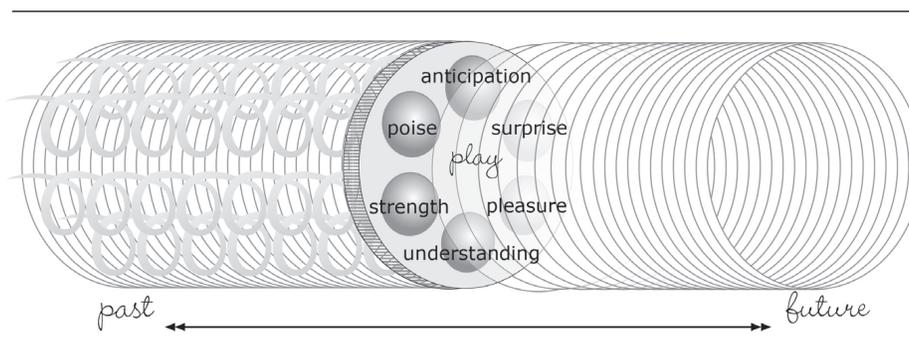


Figure 3. Play as an emergent process

fast-forward mode. That animation would help us understand how we outgrow some forms of play while still retaining some connection to them: we do not find bear baiting hilarious the way our Elizabethan forebears did, for example,³⁸ but prizefighting, still popular, retains its obvious ties to the old blood sports. On the other hand, circumstances can change so much that we encounter something new: playing the ancient game of checkers against a computer alters the pace so radically that the game almost becomes a different thing. Or the third possibility—the more things change, the more they remain the same—for instance, a continuous thread of delight and discovery may connect an infant playing with her food to the culinary inspirations of future four-star chef.

Play is hard to parse also because playing holds a fractal quality.³⁹ To look at each element is to examine the pieces of a broken holograph that contain the others curled up within; each smithereen holds in itself the capacity to reconstruct the whole. We prepare for the surprises that play promises; playing leaves us poised for what comes next. Anticipation and surprise are themselves pleasures. Pleasure of several kinds sustains play. It is the pleasure we take in playing that keeps us at it long enough to increase our skills, and as we learn more about ourselves and the people with whom we play, we grow in another kind of knowing. These two kinds of understanding both are varieties of strength. And it is the strength we derive from physical, intellectual, social, and emotional understanding that grants us the poise that readies us to play some more.

Play has resisted definition mainly because it is difficult to render dynamic relationships into language. If only we could have recourse to a branch of mathematics, a differential calculus to describe play. But, for the present, images and English will have to do. So in conclusion let me propose an ongoing, onward-rolling definition (refined with the help of my colleague Stuart Brown) befitting the onward-rolling course: “Play is an ancient, voluntary, ‘emergent’ process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more.”

Thus play unfolds as a series of fortunate events driven by emotional experiences. To think of play this way is not to prettify the concept but to clarify it. The dark spaces at the fringes of play do offer fascinating detours useful as contrasts and counterexamples. But again, play offers roomy territory inside. Play can be challenging or soothing, rough or gentle, physical or intellectual, mischievous or well mannered, orderly or disorderly, competitive or cooperative, planned or spontaneous, solitary or social, inventive or rule-bound, simple

or complex, or strenuous or restful (and so on); and still it will contain the six elements of play or the potential for the six to unfold. These are not inconsistencies or contradictions, or even ambiguities for that matter; rather they tally the wealth of the field of play.

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