

What is play?

Serenella Besio

Children are such stuff as play is made on

Play!

We all know what is meant when we talk about play. Indeed, everyone considers himself an expert in play, simply because we have been children and we have played. Not only do we know many types of play but above all, we know the feelings it produces: happiness, getting lost, suspension of reality, the absolute concentration in the most total lightness. We know also its contradictions, such as the essential need to respect the rules mixed with the most uncontrolled fantasy.

We experienced the joy of imagining without limits, of playing roles in the shoes of others, of building original environments with various materials, of launching one's body in a race or in a competition. We immediately recognise the gleam – pure life – in the gaze of a friend who invites us, without words, to play. There are no barriers or differences – social, geographical, ethnic, of gender or age – that can prevent children from playing; no translations or special interpretations are necessary for them to agree on how to play.

Adults often cultivate some forms of playful activities throughout their lives. But once in a while every adult cannot avoid answering to an impromptu proposal of play that comes from a child, that shows up in a day of vacation, that originates from a secret thought. Then, in a moment, the adult feels like a child again, and those sensations come back alive, real, unchanged over time. In some happy cases, that gleam in the eyes of those who accept or launch a playful provocation can also be encountered in an elderly person, reviving the liveliness of childhood time.

The origin of play is lost in the mists of time. It seems to belong to the human species since the very beginning. We can consider the primitives' paintings

2 *What is play?*

in the caves as a first expression of playfulness, as well as their use of propitiatory masks highlighted in the rock engravings (dating up to 30,000 years ago). It is worth to remember that the oldest known toy – a parallelepiped in clay with round recesses – was found in Bulgaria, dating back to the 5th millennium BC. Toys were usually buried in children's graves among the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans. The awareness that other animal species play – mammals, birds, but also reptiles and insects – is another proof in favour of the hypothesis that play is an innate competence. How can we be sure? We know this because we recognise play when it is there, and we can also describe it in these animals, for some typical characteristics, including the manifestation of pleasure, gratuity, the correlation with the absence of concomitant vital and stressing activities (hunting, feeding, sleeping, ...)

But what is play then? How can it be defined? Western culture has been dealing with this question since its origins, under many perspectives: philosophy, from Plato onwards, along the history of its pedagogical branch, through Locke, Fénelon, Fröbel, Montessori, Dewey; psychology, with the main contributions of its leading representatives in the study of childhood (Piaget, Vygotskij, Bruner, Winnicott), and the scholars that followed, up to today (Smilansky, Rubin, Garvey, Santrock, Parten); ethology, with Tinbergen first and Burghardt in our days. Among the most brilliant and fruitful interpretations, however, are those of scholars who – adopting a playful and irreverent approach – have overcome the rigid boundaries between the traditional disciplines. Johan Huizinga studied the play as a necessary foundation for culture and social organisation, in such an original way that he gave new significance to cultural anthropology. The eclectic Gregory Bateson offered the idea, very fruitful both for scientific speculation and for educational applications, of play as a 'frame', as a diverse world. Roger Caillois established the most original and inventive classification for all the forms of play into four categories – *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*. Brian Sutton-Smith, an excellent and prolific scholar in the field, has succeeded in establishing the play as a discipline in its own right.

It is therefore not surprising that the literature on play is very wide and has explored the most diverse perspectives, so as to identify and describe many features. In contrast to this wealth of reflections, however, there is an astonishing evidence: in fact, the scholars have not found, over time, an agreement on a single definition of the phenomenon. Indeed, Sutton-Smith himself, after an umpteenth review of studies on the subject, declared that 'no single definition could contain it'. And if this finding can, on the one hand, freshen the enthusiasm of those who

exalt the elusiveness and the mystery of play, on the other, as Burghardt has effectively argued, it challenges the scientific validity of different play studies. Without a shared definition it is not possible to compare results, to test hypothesis, to identify research lines or assess the progress in the knowledge on play.



Beatrice, 5 years old, Italy

Definition and fundamentals of play

LUDI adopted Garvey's 1990 definition of play: 'Play is a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities associated with recreational pleasure and enjoyment'. Among the many characteristics of play described in the literature, some of them are worthy of mention:

- a feeling of *freedom* is related to play, that players deeply perceive and can also be recognized by people observing others playing; a freedom which is neither disorder nor laziness;
- *pleasure* and/or fun are always associated to play too, to the point that they have been considered as an unavoidable dimension of play and are today considered as a value in themselves;
- play requires and claims for *concentration, intensity, seriousness* - we all know how difficult is to detach a child from his/her toy or to interrupt the game of a group of children; the play activity is immersive and an absent-minded play companion is immediately scolded by his/her peers;
- play is the main way through which children reveal their inexhaustible willingness to take active part in the life of their environment; it is in fact driven by *intrinsic* motivation - the new-born shows an immediate interest into playful interactions with the adult, children are naturally and constantly oriented towards play, etc.; by curiosity - to explore how a tool may be used, to experiment new rules of a game, etc.; by surprise - which often is the key to start playing; and also by challenge - to find a solution to a problem in a board or a construction game, to set difficult goals or to impose new constraints to make a game more complex, etc.

Six aspects, called 'fundamentals of play' by LUDI and presented in the list below, draw a clear portrait of the play and of the playing child.

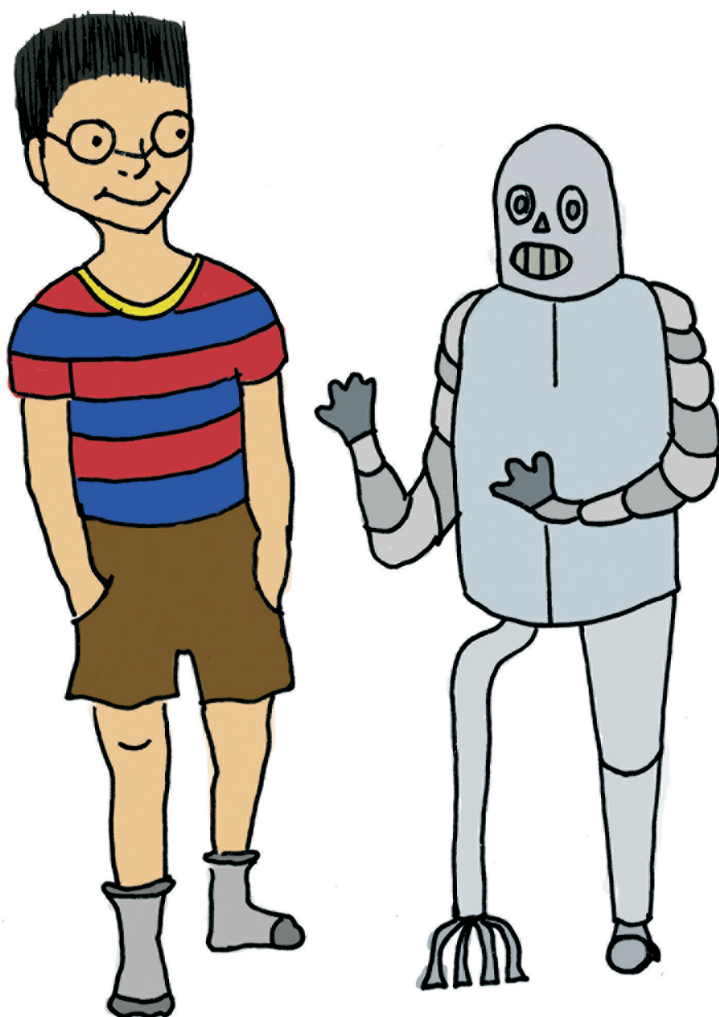
- *The concept of frame.* Play is a special context in life, a frame that one can get in, get out, that can be suspended for a while, in which behaviours, meanings, rules and roles are different from reality. Players create, recognise and

agree on this play frame, that is contemporarily invisible and concrete and that they inhabit and defend both from intruders and sceptics.

- *The need of doing.* Play is related to the human fundamental need to be active, to interact with the world around. The process of doing seems to be interesting per se, and more important than its results. Children themselves impose limitations and constraints to their activity, thus obtaining both the goals of being reassured by repetition and feeling challenged by novelty.
- *The role of imagination and fantasy.* Play is also the main door for entering 'another reality', for evoking situations, combining representations, developing thought; it is the door to the profusion of symbols, language, metaphors, creativity and imagination.
- *The importance of the rules.* Rules in play are not limited to games; they are rather intrinsic to all the kinds of play at any developmental age, first created by children themselves and later socially agreed-upon. According to Vygotskij, 'the essential attribute in play is a rule that has become a desire' and Bondioli underlines that children take pleasure in 'self-submitting to the rule of giving up spontaneous and impulsive actions'. In some cases, rules can put the players into trouble: getting out of it is the gist of play.
- *The social aspects of play.* Play is social in two main senses: because children learn to play in dual relationships or in groups, and because most of the types and modes of play require social contexts. Play relationships with peers are irreplaceable in childhood to learn by imitation, to face different opinions, to acknowledge the need for mediation, to develop skills of cooperation, to overcome conflicts. Adult and parental influence is vital for the child to start and learn how to play: at the beginning, they can be protagonist models, and then – by gradually fading their interaction – they can become prompters, scaffolders, companions, spectators. Please refer to Chapter 5 for a discussion on the role of an adult supporting children's play.
- *The play development in childhood.* Play develops and changes along childhood; it becomes more complex, it changes its features and its focus, by addressing different tools and/or ways to interpret the reality and the human beings. Research identified different types of play and showed that a given type of play prevails in certain developmental phases, then it merges with others, and it may disappear but also re-emerge in different forms, in different times of life.

Types of play

What are then these types of play? Play development has been described along two main dimensions, the cognitive and the social, which has been interpreted contemporarily as a consequence and as a cause of their growing complexity in time. After deep analysis on the field literature, LUDI has adopted the following classification of types of play.



Jana, 16 years old, Croatia

Cognitive dimension

Practice play.

It is the first type of play that appears in life, related to body actions – from simple to complex – and to the visual and tactile experimentation of objects. Repetition is a typical characteristic of this type of play.

Symbolic play.

It starts around the second year of life, and it refers to the symbolic use of one's own body and of objects, as they were something else, to pretend and make-believe activities. The simplest form of this type of play is the simulation of action with the body – pretending to eat, to drive a car, etc.; the most complex is the role playing – acting roles and planning scenes for them.

Constructive play.

It consists in gathering, combining, arranging and fitting more elements to form a whole, and achieve a specific goal. The child combines abilities gained through practice and symbolic play, and the three types reciprocally co-exist and feed off each other.

Play with rules.

It includes play and games based on a specific code and rules accepted and followed by the players. It starts with simple rules invented by the players to make their play activities more challenging and it may evolve in the use of board games, as well as in sport activities.

Social dimension

Solitary play.

The child plays alone and independently even if surrounded by others.

Parallel play.

The child plays independently performing the same activity, at the same time, and in the same place of other persons, also engaged in play, without joining them.

Associative play.

The child is focused on a separate activity with respect to his/her peers, but there is a considerable amount of sharing, lending, taking turns with them.

Cooperative play.

Joining others in sustained engagement in activities with objects, toys, materials or games with a shared goal or purpose. Children can organize their play cooperatively with a common goal and are able to differentiate and assign roles.

Each type of play appears at a certain point of the child's life, usually according to the order shown in the table, in the form of an embryonic new group of behaviours, and it becomes more and more complex during time. Furthermore, soon each type of play intertwines with the other ones, which already belong to the child's repertoire, provoking changes in them; vice-versa, in some cases, very basic patterns of primitive types of play appear again to support more advanced play activities.

Play for the sake of play and play-like activities

In the history of education, play has not rarely been seen as useless, potentially distracting and subversive, unpredictable and uncontrollable; it was often repressed or at best channelled since it was deemed contrary to the seriousness of didactic engagement and schoolwork. Today, the commitment to play can be found in early childhood school programs in many different countries: dedicated spaces are organized, with appropriate materials and right time in the curriculum; nevertheless, even if play is accepted, in many cases it is still seen as a necessary outburst, sometimes relegated to the recess, where teachers and educators can ignore it.

Distinguished pedagogists and educators, however, realised that the strong potential of play to capture and maintain the child's attention on activities usually considered boring or difficult could be important for changing the climate of classrooms and family contexts and for making educational activities become closer to the child's propensities.

This is why the methodology of applying playfulness to the educational areas addressed to childhood was born; materials and tools were developed, working methodologies and strategies have spread that make learning more light, engaging, full of surprises and joy. Since then, children's play has become a useful strategy for proposing learning activities, in schools, in other educational settings, at home. Playful activities are also presented, in the case of children with disabilities, in rehabilitation contexts. Many toy companies assure educational value on their products' packaging; schoolbooks are geared to the so-called gamification and are often accompanied by playful drill-and-practice software environments. However, the play adopted in these cases loses some peculiar features: for example, freedom, pure ludic spirit, transgression of rules, imagination and fantasy, autonomous initiative and choice. According to Visalberghi these activities, despite being amusing and fun, do not end in themselves, rather are 'controlled' by the adult and dominated by the educational final scope. He called them 'play-like activities'. Despite their importance, play-like activities do not cover all the forms play may assume, because they have pre-ordained educational goals.

It was the advent of the constructivist and active approaches in pedagogy and in psychology, about the second half of the last century, that brought a refreshing new tone in the childhood studies: children started to be considered the resilient protagonists of their own developmental process - they have rights, they are active constructors of knowledge, they are social beings and, thanks to their curiosity and their inexhaustible desire to solve the problems they face, they may be viewed also as researchers. According to the famous 'Reggio Emilia approach', as Hewett and some other authors recognize, every child should be given the opportunity to show which types of play attract him/her the most and to try further ones, so that new interests and evolving skills may be discovered and developed. Through play, the child will show desires and propensities, and will implement the best solutions to overcome the possible difficulties he/she may meet.

Play as such, play for the sake of play, responds only to the play needs and wishes of the child; it develops and stops for its own reasons, it does not have constraints that are not decided by the child him or herself. Play for the sake of play contains the exact 'rate' and type of fun and challenge that the child wants. It favours experimentation, exploration, curiosity, imagination because it is intrinsically driven; due to its inherent flexibility, it can stop at any time and re-start all of a sudden, it tolerates changing rules under the only obligation of an agreement among players. It is totally adherent to the child's personal idea of what is compelling, pleasant and exciting for him/her, because it is the child who continuously invents and monitors it. It makes it possible to create fantastic worlds only inhabited by the child with his or her imaginary playmates.

Why is play important?

But if fun produced by play is a formidable spring to involve the child in activities that are considered important by the adults, what about play for the sake of play? If this one is just recreation and leisure, why should it be considered so important?

The main reason is that it is through play that children develop and grow up as human beings: persons able to purposefully act on their life environments and to positively take part into society.

Freedom, curiosity, imagination, adherence to – and subversion of – rules, concentration, repetition, satisfaction, set up of goals, planning, problem solving are only

some of the traits that are put into action while playing. The quality and the range of different play experiences made by a child will pave the way to an adult rich in resources, creativity, self-confidence, sociability and cheerfulness; the complete and absolute happiness provoked by play will remain one of the most powerful feelings experienced in life.

However, it is impossible to determine what children might learn when they play for the sole sake of play: it will depend on the chosen type of play, on the way the play activity is concretely put into action, on the companions' quality of participation, on the contexts where play happens. They might learn psychomotor and cognitive abilities – how to be effective in throwing a ball, to climb a tree, to solve an impasse in a board game, to build a rudimentary canoe by oneself, to use irony, metaphors and fantasy in general, to plan a strategy, etc.; social abilities – how to involve peers in a game, to coordinate the roles, to mediate during conflicts, to argue one's reasons, to keep secrets, to conceal a feeling or an idea, etc.; emotional abilities – how to recognize one's own limits, to accept defeat, to perceive and enjoy happiness or to cope with fear and with exhaustion.

Above all, they will learn a lot about themselves – their preferences, abilities, inclinations – and about the others – how to recognize their intentions and feelings, how to relate with them, how different or unpredictable their emotions and behaviours may be. They may develop self-confidence on their own strengths and may use the privileged and protected situation of play to learn how to overcome their weaknesses.

Play for the sake of play is also important for the large amount of information the observer might gather from it on the individual child's ability, cognitive styles, overall well-being and sociability.

A parent, an educator or a practitioner can enter the child's play to improve, increase, and develop it; not for reaching external goals, not to turn it into a play-like activity, but only to pursue objectives inherent to the play itself. Learning to enter children's play, with full awareness of one's own adulthood, but maintaining and respecting the constraints and limitations of the play that children are actually playing and adopting the appropriate scaffolding strategies to support the interactions between children and between the child and the adult, is a new competence for adults to reach: becoming able to work behind the scenes, preparing the play materials and contexts and assuring the right climate for the carrying out of the play activity. Guidelines to achieve this are provided in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Even if we do not know why play exists or even if putting this question has any reasonable sense, for sure play is an irreplaceable apprenticeship for life and a continuous source of serenity.

In spite of being studied for centuries, play still preserves a fascinating air of mystery, for its peculiar characteristics that make it unmistakable and powerful.

Dozens of definitions and descriptions of play have been proposed in the related fields of study. In this chapter, the definition of play adopted by LUDI has been discussed, and some important traits have been described, together with a consistent classification of the types of play. To understand and interpret in-depth the child's play, in fact, a clear framework is needed. When a child plays freely, without any limitation, he/she does a very special activity and always chooses a specific type of play, or a mix of types. Referring to this activity simply as 'free play' is not exhaustive enough; we should instead be aware of what concept of play we are using, and which type of play is involved: because each type of play has its own characteristics, constraints and development possibilities.

This is particularly true in the case of play for the sake of play, intrinsically motivated and autonomously initiated, that we mostly want to pursue for children with disabilities.



Rita, 9 years old, Spain