

An Essay: The Psychology of Play

“When I grow up I want to be a little boy.”
- Joseph Heller

Why do people play? Some say it provides an interactive social experience that helps learn. Others believe its fun and challenging at times. What is play? People play games. Games are loosely defined as an activity that are a fundamental part of human existence – athletic, board, card and computer games to name a few.

Play manifests itself in myriad forms and is a common occurrence amongst significantly evolved living organisms. From the primal wolf cub that paws at a rabbit brought by its mother to a teenager duking it out over high-end networked computers at annual video game conventions. In the former, seemingly playful and mindless activities actually translate to superior hunting ability and other survival skills. For the teenager, it's an immersive process through which he/she has the ability to demonstrate prowess and establish his/her identity resulting in fantastic fulfillment.

There have been various attempts to deconstruct the ever elusive underlying need for humans involve themselves with play. The Schiller- Spencer Surplus Energy Theory, the Practice Theory of Play, Play as a form of Catharsis and other such that take a serious jab at explaining the psychology of play.

I think the analysis of play is extremely complex and can be rationally approached as consisting of multiple parameters that fulfill the specific needs of those participating in it. These parameters include but are not limited to:

- Exercise
- Social Lubrication
- Fantasy/exploration
- Need for acknowledgement
- Sensory gratification
- Need for proving one's self

Note the subtle nuances that set apart factors that motivate people to play games and factors that allow to choose between games. Sensory gratification serves a perfect example of one such selection factor. One invariable compliments excellent graphics and visualizations associated with a computer game, at the same time, superior graphics won't motivate many people to play games.

Another important aspect that determines the psychology of play is the personality of the player in question. An individual's taste in games is ever-changing, and is more often than not need based. If the player is looking for competition in play, it would involve a combination of mental and corporeal faculties whether interacting with the game or other players participating in it.

Play could also just address the fundamental need for experiential activity that serves as an alternative to the monotony and drudgery associated with work. Even the most extensive and terse of studies on the psychology of play at times render themselves as speculative and thin when it comes to defining the relationship between work and play. Nonetheless, each significant finding taking us a step closer to a utopian world where the definitions of work and play can be used interchangeably. Like Alan Watts so aptly said "The real secret to life – to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now. And instead of calling it work, realize its play."

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