

Integral Play

AN EXPLORATION OF THE PLAYGROUND AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE PLAYER

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In an effort to understand the transformative potential of adult play, this article defines and maps the widely varied adult play forms onto the Integral model, thus providing a coherent sense of the domains and levels of experience they occupy. In part 1, we explore the challenge of defining play so that our understanding is robust and precise enough to lend itself to an Integral analysis. In part 2, we organize play's myriad modes within an Integral framework, revealing the dimensions of the playground. Part 3 offers a developmental model for adult play that provides an understanding of the unfolding complexity of play in light of the evolution of consciousness. And part 4 shows how play is not only an epiphenomenon but also an instigator of transformation, offering examples of transformative adult play and outlining how characteristics intrinsic to play support the evolution of consciousness.

The universe created our sense of adventurous play as the latest extravagance in a long history of advancing play. By enhancing it we work with the grain of cosmic dynamics.

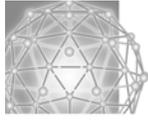
—Brian Swimme, mathematical cosmologist¹

Introduction

Let us play a little mind game. Imagine a world without play. All boundaries are rigid, and all activity is purposeful, lawful, and prescribed. There are no games, no fantasies, no jokes, and certainly no thought experiments. Can you see the landscape? What else disappears with the absence of play? Would there even be a world?

Thinking lucidly about the ludic (from the Latin *ludens*, meaning “play”) promises to open our imaginations and broaden our understanding of the world. But before we even get started, we trip on a small problem: what exactly do we mean by play? We all think we know what play is. We certainly know it when we are doing it. But when we try to pin down a definition, things start to get slippery. After all, we play defined rule-bound games that we plan in advance, but play also erupts spontaneously and breaks the rules. Play can be lighthearted and exuberant, but also serious and intense. It is real but not real, safe but risky. It involves strategy, will, and skill, but can also hedge its bets on fate. Whole civilizations form out of play. Then play rips off the civilized facades, topples structures, and levels the playing field. Play invents a teacup then turns it into a hat. It organizes then randomizes, sets the rhythm then skips a beat. Play is irreducible, infinitely variable, and utterly essential to life. But what is it?

Despite many attempts to explain its nature and function, and the hundreds of definitions available (there are no fewer than 34 definitions for play listed in the Oxford English Dictionary), the play concept remains as elusive today as it was 2,500 years ago, when prerational Dionysian play began to give way to rational Apollonian play.² Still, much of the



confusion and ambiguity around play is less a function of its inherent nature than it is a failure to map its forms in a way that provides a coherent sense of the domains and levels of experience they occupy. With an Integral map we have an opportunity to gain an understanding of the depth and complexity of play that has eluded previous attempts.

We do not claim that the Integral perspective has ultimate legitimacy. Every approach is inherently limited in light of the infinite complexity and variability—dare we say—the *play* of reality itself. We do think, however, that the Integral model currently provides the most comprehensive and nuanced framework available with which to understand play and its transformative potential. Our hope is that instead of pressing play into the service of our Integral worldview we might use this perspective in the service of play, enhancing our appreciation of its variable, elusive, and paradoxical nature.

Part 1: Defining Play

The most irritating feature of play is not the perceptual incoherence, as such, but rather, that play taunts us with its inaccessibility. We feel that something is behind it all, but we do not know, or have forgotten how to see it.

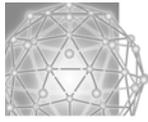
—Robert Fagen, leading animal play theorist³

The History

There are few subjects that have been poked and prodded by as many disciplines as play has. Biology, psychology, education, anthropology, sociology, history, cosmology, physics, leisure studies, literary theory, art history, animal behavior, philosophy, and religious studies have all aimed their methodologies at the play phenomenon, and, like the famous blind men describing their limited section of the elephant, each discipline has come to a different conclusion about the nature of play. The entertainment examined by scholars of leisure studies seems to be in an entirely different universe from the imaginative play studied by developmental psychologists. While each discipline that studies play is searching for the truth, it inadvertently drafts the concept into the service of its own perspective at the expense of a full understanding and appreciation of play.⁴

For decades starting in the late 18th century, evolutionary biologists and psychologists proposed only deterministic and utilitarian definitions of play. In 1938, the Dutch anthropologist, John Huizinga presented a radically new understanding. According to Huizinga, an activity is play if it is fully absorbing, includes elements of uncertainty, involves a sense of illusion or exaggeration, and, most importantly, exists outside of ordinary life and only for its own sake. That is, even though absorbed by the activity, the player is always conscious of the fact that the play is not real and that its consequences will not affect their lives outside the play.⁵

While Huizinga's views have been significantly modified since 1938, most researchers still agree that play is intrinsically motivated and occurs in a "space" distinct from "reality." The tendency to narrowly circumscribe our notion of play around only those "meta-activities" that lie outside of "ordinary" life is unique to the West. In Hinduism, for example, play is an essential part of the cosmology, the play of Shakti and Shiva constituting and permeating all of existence. In such cultures, anthropologist David Handelman tells us, "Qualities of play are integral to the operation of the cosmos. To be in play is to reproduce the time and again the very premises that inform the existence of this kind of cosmos."⁶



The worldview from which contemporary play theories have emerged does not tolerate the notion of playfulness—nor consciousness, for that matter—existing anywhere except in the minds of complex organisms. This perspective is the result of a 2,500 year battle between a prerational Dionysian understanding of play as the random, raw agonistic whim of the Gods, and a rational, orderly Apollonian view of play that sees it in service of evolution.⁷ Philosopher Mihai Spariasu provides a brilliant rendering of the interplay of these two schools of thought throughout Western history in his book *Dionysus Reborn*, warning that, though many philosophers have tried, we cannot have it both ways. Dionysus and Apollo will never play nicely together.

But just as recent discoveries in physics have revealed a secret alliance between chaos and order from the broader perspective of complexity science, we might also find rational and prerational perspectives reconciled from a broader transrational perspective. Like play itself, a trans-rational perspective dwells in paradox. It is not, as one might suppose, a thinly veiled rational Hegelian synthesis, but the recognition of the validity of both non-rational and rational worldviews simultaneously.

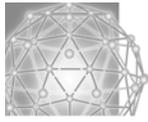
For our understanding of play to encompass the full transrational paradox and variability of play, it must be as protean and flexible as play itself. It must articulate the structures underlying the full range of forms conventionally understood as play, including both competitive and cooperative games, solo and social play, skill based and fate based games, introverted and extroverted play, intrinsically and extrinsically motivated play, as well as rule based and rule breaking play. But it cannot stop there. It must also encompass the play from the scale of atoms to that of the cosmos as a whole, without collapsing into generalities that fail to illuminate the central features that make games a special and heightened case.

Defining Play

As the preeminent contemporary play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith warns us, an absolute definition for play at the level of cosmology and physics can never be proven scientifically. And so we are searching instead for the metaphors that will open our imaginations to the full depth and breadth of the play concept. Sutton-Smith finds that the dynamics that give rise to the enormous variability of play are rooted in the biological processes that give rise to the same kind of variability in nature. He cites the work of evolution biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who claims that evolution is determined by adaptive variability, characterized by “sloppiness, broad potential, quirkiness, unpredictability, and, above all, massive redundancy. The key is flexibility, not admirable precision.”⁸ Sutton-Smith finds a correspondence between the characteristics of play and each of Gould’s principles, stating that “if quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility are keys to evolution, then finding play to be itself quirky, redundant, and flexible certainly suggests that play may have a similar biological base.”⁹

Sutton-Smith finds another biological correlation between the high potentiality with which play begins and that which distinguishes the early stages of the development of the human brain. Play as novel adaptation corresponds to the evolutionary process itself. He defines play as a facsimilization of the “struggle for survival.” This facsimilization, claims Sutton-Smith, “increases the organism’s variability in the face of rigidifications.”¹⁰

While these correlations between play and fundamental biological processes do a great service in broadening our appreciation of play, they are both too vague and too restricted to provide a full appreciation of play. Adaptive variability may be a product of play, but we then wonder what



transpires in play that creates this variability? In addition, Sutton-Smith limits play to the behavior of “higher animals.” Instead of seeing mammalian play as derivative of core evolutionary processes, perhaps it is an extension of these processes? Instead of a “survival strategy,” animal play may be the articulation and enhancement of the play that exists at the core of reality and human play may be its hominization, not its facsimilization. Enacting the fundamental dynamics of existence certainly is conducive to survival but that does not necessarily mean it is a survival strategy any more than growth or communication is.

Playfulness

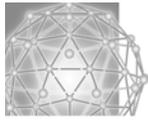
We need a deeper understanding of play to account for its evolutionary nature and that sheds light on its sense of freedom and delight; in other words, the sheer playfulness of play when play is at its best. Susanna Millar, in her classic *The Psychology of Play*, goes as far as to suggest that “perhaps play is best used as an adverb; not as a name of a class of activities, nor as distinguished by the accompanying mood, but to describe how and under what conditions an action is performed.”¹¹ This is not to project the capacity for attitude or intention onto subatomic particles but to apply the insights we gain by understanding playfulness to the universe as a whole.

What is central to playfulness, says Millar, is “an attitude of throwing off constraint.”¹² These constraints might be physical, emotional, social, or intellectual. Play sometimes detaches messages, experiences, or objects from their context of origin, creating a new frame that allows for greater freedom, interactivity, and creative possibilities. When we throw off the constraints of a given context, we are free to move, to engage with new contexts as well as to engage the context of our recent experience as an object of play.

Most work on play characterizes it as a set of features that shift the frame of activity from one domain to another through the meta-message that “this is play.”¹³ Generally, this is meant as the shift from reality to a new play-specific space/time with its own rules of procedure. Playfulness is the attitude that makes this shift possible. By bracketing experience, it enables us to step outside of and manipulate interpretive frames from the perspective of another frame.

We certainly know positive forms of playfulness when we see them—a lightness of heart, a glint in the eye, alertness, enthusiasm, and readiness for surprise. There is a sense of involvement *and* detachment, self-expression *and* self-transcendence, individuality *and* cooperation. Boundaries become fluid, defenses dissolve, and physical, emotional, or mental movements become spontaneous, expanded, and well-coordinated. The considerable research on playfulness tells us that the traits of the playful include physical, cognitive, and social spontaneity, manifest joy, and a sense of humor.¹⁴ Playfulness carries the presence, flexibility, and openness needed to improvise with and expand the stream of possibilities as they emerge in each moment.¹⁵

Freedom is a hallmark of play. While the concept of freedom has a divergent and contradictory philosophical history, it remains a condition for play. As boundaries soften, not only does adaptive variability and potentiation increase, but the parts of the player become coordinated into spontaneous action. The autonomy of the parts is balanced by their integration with the play community. Playfulness entails spontaneous, free, and harmonious movement within and among the parts of the player, whether the player is a chimpanzee, an amoeba, or a symphony orchestra. For “higher animals,” playfulness entails spontaneous, free movement within and among the parts of the self. It is the freedom of the total self to move as a whole in relationship to the total environment.



As theater luminary Viola Spolin explains,

In spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitation for the student to transcend himself or herself—he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure, and face all dangers unafraid.... Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure.¹⁶

Spolin captures the main elements of playfulness: its spontaneity, participation, intimacy, delight, flexibility, freedom, risk, and harmonious relationship of the parts with the whole. The spontaneity arises when we throw off the constraints both internally and externally that separate and suppress players.

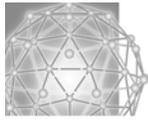
The Parts and the Whole

Play's impulse toward both freedom and connection makes transformations possible. The transformations of play occur through interactions across boundaries in the back and forth movement of encounter and exchange that characterizes most of life, but which is heightened in play. Philosopher James Hans offers a description of play derived from Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic circle that builds on this theme.¹⁷ Along with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans tells us that the key move of the player is the leap out of the conventional frame of the self.¹⁸ The full absorption of a player in the play loosens the burden of being a discrete subject split from object, and, in this "ecstatic self-forgetfulness" or self-transcendence, both "subject" and "object" are inevitably changed. The players integrate these transformations in ways that expand and further their differentiation so they can once again act on and open into the playground. Both the players and the playground, the parts and the whole, are transformed, that is to say further differentiated and integrated through the communion of play.

Hans' assertion raises many important questions: While play is generally characterized by the players' full absorption in the activity, is it quite the metaphysical salve for the subject/object split that Hans suggests? Does the subject have to dissolve entirely into the play for play to occur? What is the nature of the relationship among players? How is the absorption of play different from that of work or survival strategies? These questions suggest that there may be a more complex dynamic between the parts and the whole than for which Hans' model accounts.

In his luminous and comprehensive work, *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler explores the nature of the creative act in ways that shed light on this dynamic.¹⁹ He sees the central activity of creativity to be the meeting of previously separated associative frames and calls this encounter *bisociation*. According to Koestler, there are three ways in which bisociation can occur, each with a different effect. Associative frames can *collide* as in the case of comedy. They can temporarily *unite* in an aesthetic experience as they do with art. Or they can *fit together* into a new more comprehensive frame as they do with scientific discovery.

Koestler believed that each mode of boundary play expresses a different relationship between the parts and the whole. In the comedic mode, the part asserts itself over the whole with a laugh. Aesthetic innovation, on the other hand, is a self-transcending encounter between frames that creates a deep participation of the part with the whole such that the unity of the whole is revealed to the part (even if the part takes credit for the artwork). In scientific discovery, the "aha!" or "Eureka!" of discovery is part-centered, while the integration of the new knowledge affirms a



new level of coherence between the parts and the whole. The bisociative act depends in various degrees on unconscious processes and imaginative leaps beyond the boundaries of routine thought. Bisociation, as Koestler defines it, is fundamental to play. Mammalian play bisociates between everyday life and the play space, whereas simpler forms of play bisociate solely between physical frames or, as Hans would call them, “centers of play.” Play then involves the dance between parts and the whole where the part can assert itself over the whole (e.g., comedy), the whole can assert itself over the part (e.g., aesthetics), or the part and whole can strike a balance—a creative tension (e.g., scientific discover). Play in its best moments serves to transform both the parts and the whole in a participatory embrace that enacts new worlds and creates new boundaries and play spaces.

In its worst moments, the player assimilates the world to fit into their developmental frame in ways that not only reduce the complexity of the world but also violate the subjectivity of other players. This play does not actually bisociate, it absorbs objects into a single associative frame that serves the narcissistic needs of the player. Piaget, the Swiss psychologist and one of the first theorists to explore childhood play, wrote extensively about the assimilative function of play in children.

The Leap

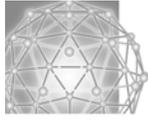
Since Plato first observed children and animals playing, the “leap” has been a central metaphor used to describe play.²⁰ The image emphasizes the sense of exuberance and freedom at the center of play as well as its boundary crossing nature. We leap out of constraints in order to obtain freedom, we leap for joy to celebrate achieving freedom, and we leap across frames because we are free to explore. This exploratory drive is as fundamental to “higher animals” as the survival instinct.²¹ In fact, play is defined physically as the ability “to move or operate freely in a bounded space.”²² Most play is characterized as a particular kind of leap across boundaries into and between new frames, or to and fro between opposites. We even talk metaphorically about the play of opposites.

The space in between poles is the playground. Preeminent psychologist D. W. Winnicott, in his classic, *Playing and Reality*, characterizes play in humans as the vital connection between self and world that involves full imaginative engagement between inner and outer life.²³ Inhabiting this in-between space of play, which Winnicott calls the potential or transitional space, is, according to the psychologist, the source of all creativity and health.

We cannot leap without a place to land. There would be no levity without gravity, no freedom without boundaries. The play leap is not merely the escape from bondage, but, as Hans suggests, the freedom to participate fully in, to transform and be transformed by the world. In this way, play is far from being a break from reality but rather the nature of reality itself in constant transformative engagement with itself. When we play, we feel the intrinsic joy and vitality of participating in reality on its own terms, instead of trying to control and manipulate it to serve our needs. This participation may or may not give rise to innovations (it may just be a good romp), but it always generates more potential for play.

Toward a Definition

As our exploration illustrates, play has many irreducible features, some of which have been highlighted by different theorists. In light of this, a rich and full understanding of play needs to consider the quirkiness, redundancies, and flexibility that lead to adaptive variability and high potentiation. It needs to consider the to and fro movement of the hermeneutic circle in which the



center of play is absorbed in the field of play and both are transformed. It must consider the nature of bisociative encounters which are either part-centered, whole-centered, or balanced between the two. It must appreciate the “in-between” play space in which play encounters take place. It must also consider the inviting, attentive, disarming attitude of playfulness, its intrinsic pleasure, as well as the freedom and cooperation essential to play.

We retain much of the understanding that contemporary researchers have had regarding play’s absorbing, voluntary, and pleasurable nature. However, unlike the conventional understanding, we do not define play to be outside of “real life” nor to be of purposeless intent. Instead, play is central to real life, even if it does provide a break for “higher players” from the habits and rigidities of ordinary consciousness. It is also highly purposeful, though usually not toward any explicit goals held by the players. Play’s purpose is to generate more possibilities for play.

This definition of play and the examples we use might also be true for the creative process in general. However, the core difference between creativity and play is that, while creativity produces artifacts, play produces possibilities. Play makes creativity possible while creativity manifests possibility into actuality. In other words, while creativity is based on play, play is not necessarily creative. Most games, for instance, entail far more redundancy than creativity. Children seem to enact the same make-believe tea party or vengeful monster scenes endlessly. It is, however, often from redundancy that novelty (eventually) emerges.

Obstacles to Play

The most immediately distinctive features of play are the freedom it expresses, its spontaneity, the bracketing of frames or contexts, and the agreements and cooperation among playmates. Play stops when participants are not free to play, become objects of play, or are unaware that they are involved in play. War, violent crime, and practical jokes may be play for the perpetrators, but it certainly is not for the victims. In this case, the consensual nature of play is lacking. What might be a playmate is instead an object of play. Here we start to see the need for a developmental model for adult play that can account for the capacity for intersubjectivity as a function of maturity and increasing play capacity. For now, we need only understand that if we are not free to play, we are not playing.

The freedom of play is absent in any activity that has become rigid, unconscious, habitual, or compulsive, even if it started out as play. We often see this with television watching, video game playing, gambling, or drug use. We also see it with the repetitive, regressive “play” of trauma survivors, which is either the routinized reenactments of the trauma or the play of the developmental stage arrested when the trauma occurred. The restless play of the forty year-old *Puer Eterne* is less an expression of the freedom associated with youth than the resistance to playing at new levels of development and complexity. The “kidults” or “rejuveniles,” who visit Disneyland regularly, collect Care Bears, and attend children’s concerts, may be asserting their freedom by casting off the constraints of a work-obsessed culture. But they may also be holding onto the forms of play of an earlier stage of development, which was never played out. Play does not have to disappear with adulthood. It only diminishes when we resist adulthood and confuse our development with the increase in seriousness instead of the increase in dimensions of play.

The focus on accomplishing immediate, instrumental objectives also blocks play. An activity stops being play when it is driven by goals and inhibited by the fear of real life consequences. With all these examples, the freedom of play is lacking. Play occurs when the player is free from



compulsion and free to risk all the insults and injuries of full participation, such as losing, failing, and making a fool of him/herself.

Cosmic Play

Play is integral to an evolving cosmos. After all, no change can occur without the crossing of boundaries and the opening of players and playground to mutual influence. And while some of these boundary crossings may appear rigidly rule-bound and mechanical—especially at the atomic, chemical, molecular, and genetic level—the degree of freedom, spontaneity, and playfulness increases with the increase in the complexity of the organism. The forms of play evolve in complexity in tandem with the forms at play. What we think of as playfulness in animals is actually the articulation and enhancement of the intrinsic playfulness of the cosmos.

While this is, indeed, a rule-bound universe, within the rules, as within any game, the play ensues. If the rules and order become too restrictive, trickster chaos stirs things up, disrupting the status quo and revitalizing the play. Play requires both boundaries (order) and the impulse to cross them (chaos). When chaos and order are balanced, we find highly sensitive, flexible, cosmic, erogenous zones filled with exquisite play—dynamic spiral galaxies that give birth to planets and planets where liquid water offers the universal play bow to life, which responds by bursting into a billion forms of play. By deepening our understanding of play, we hope to not only expand our vision of the cosmos but also provide the basis for understanding the transformative powers of play at all scales of the universe.

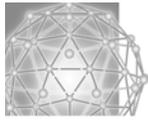
Having stretched a definitional canvas for play, we can now explore the eclectic heap of human play forms and theories to make sense of how they relate to each other. By doing so, we take a step closer to an Integral understanding of play.

Part 2: The Integral Model

As a quirky, boundary crosser, play's domain is by nature paradoxical. Still, much of the confusion and ambiguity around play is less a function of its inherent nature than it is a failure to map its forms in a way that provides a coherent sense of the domains and levels of experience they occupy. In the pluralistic spirit of play, many theorists are content to identify a range of categories for play and simply list them without fully examining their relationship to each other. But if play is integral to the evolutionary process, then its forms not only demonstrate a range of diversity (horizontal) but also a range of complexity (vertical). Using both vertical and horizontal dimensions, we can better see if play forms are different from each other in kind (form) or degree (perspective) and if so, degrees of what?

To explore the transformative power of play requires an understanding of the domains of experience play occupies, the developmental stages of adulthood, and the forms of play that correlate with each stage. We also need to understand the potential for forms to create a shift from one developmental level to another more complex level. This requires an understanding of the complexity reflected and the play forms preferred at each stage of development. Our Integral exploration of play begins with a clear map of the playground that locates play forms and their corresponding worldviews and developmental stages in relationship to each other.

We borrow the term “Integral” from the contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber.²⁴ In a world characterized by disciplinary turf wars and clashes between traditional, modern, and postmodern perspectives, Wilber has written extensively on the value of, and need for, an Integral approach



and has played an important role in establishing *Integral Theory*, a postdisciplinary framework for today’s complex world.²⁵ As a result of its applicability across disciplines, Integral Theory has received a wide embrace from individuals associated with a variety of fields: art, business, ecology, medicine, finance, consciousness studies, religion, correctional education, criminology, education, psychology, healthcare, nursing, politics, sexuality and gender studies, social service, future studies, and sustainability, to name a few.²⁶

There are five elements that comprise an Integral approach: *quadrants, levels, lines, states, and types*. These five components, referred to by the acronym AQAL (short for “all-quadrants, all-levels”), represent the intrinsic perspectives that occur at all scales and in all contexts. By including these basic elements, an Integral practitioner can be sure that they are covering all the facets, dimensions, and aspects of any phenomena. There is no ontological or epistemological priority assigned to any of the aspects, because each aspect co-arises with every other in the seamless fabric of reality in every moment.

Quadrants refer to the basic perspectives we can take on reality. There is, at any given moment, always an individual and a collective dimension. Within each of these dimensions, there is also both an interior and an exterior point of view. These four domains—the interior and exterior of individuals and collectives—are also described as the domains of: 1) experience (interior-individual); 2) culture (interior- collective); 3) behavior (exterior-individual); and 4) systems (exterior-collective). The remaining four elements of the Integral model all arise within these four basic perspectives. Figure 1 below shows how each quadrant represents a different perspective.

| | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| UPPER LEFT | UPPER RIGHT |
| Self and Consciousness | Brain and Organism |
| Interior-Individual | Exterior-Individual |
| <i>Experiences</i> | <i>Behaviors</i> |
| Subjective | Objective |
| Truthfulness | Truth |
| I | IT |
| WE | ITS |
| Interior-Collective | Exterior-Collective |
| <i>Cultures</i> | <i>Systems</i> |
| Intersubjective | Interobjective |
| Justness | Functional Fit |
| Culture and Worldview | Social System and Environment |
| LOWER LEFT | LOWER RIGHT |

Figure 1. The Four Quadrants

Levels are another way to describe the occurrence of complexity. For example, in the Upper-Right quadrant of behavior we witness the physical complexity of any given individual organism. A dog is more complex and thus located at a higher level than an amoeba.²⁷



Lines of development are another way to describe the distinct capacities that develop through levels. For example, in the Upper-Left quadrant of experience, the capacities or lines that develop include, but are not limited to, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and moral capacities.

States are the temporary occurrence of any aspect of reality. For example, stormy weather is a state that arises in the Lower-Right quadrant of systems, while euphoria is a state that occurs in the Upper-Left quadrant.

Types are the variety of styles that arise in various domains. An example would be a particular kind of religious worldview, like Protestant, in the Lower-Left quadrant of culture or the body type of an endomorphic dwarf in the Upper Right.

Each of these five elements can easily be understood in the context of play.²⁸ The quadrants represent the irreducible dimensions of play: how we experience play, what actions are part of the play, the meaning of the play, and the rules involved in play. As we explore in detail below, these quadrants or perspectives are always present in any play activity.

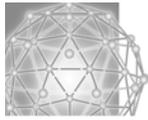
A specific play form also reflects the general altitude or level of psychological and cultural development of the players—through its inclusivity, its intention, and the sense of self of the players involved. The level of the play determines many of its features (competitive vs. cooperative games) as well as its appeal and accessibility to individuals and cultures.

Lines of psychological development such as cognitive, emotional, interpersonal capacity, moral judgment, and kinesthetic sense all have an important bearing on the way people play and the forms they choose. For instance, improvising musically requires and contributes to the development of musical ability.

States of consciousness are one of the central features and attractions of play. These can range from peak experiences and spiritual openings to cathartic discharges of energy and adrenaline rushes. We play for the fun of it, to unwind, lift our mood, or get energized! Many theorists define play as being intrinsically motivated because of these powerful, pleasurable play states. It is important to note that states are distinct from levels in that the same state may be experienced but that state will be interpreted differently from different levels of development.

Finally, whether we use the astrological archetypes, the Myers-Briggs personality profile, or the Enneagram system, an understanding of personality types sheds light on how personal preferences for different play forms may be based on different personality structures—or, more generally, how we can engage in the same play from different aspects of our personality (i.e., masculine or feminine, follower or leader).

Using the Integral model and its five elements provides a comprehensive framework for organizing the multidimensional nature of play in the self, the other, and the world. With an Integral compass in hand, we can now explore the playground and gain a better understanding of play's transformative potential, mapping play using the first three of the five elements of the Integral model: the quadrants, levels, and lines of development. Due to space limitations, we focus on the aspects of the Integral model that will shed the most light on play as a vehicle for transformation. The quadrants, levels, and lines, in our opinion, have the most general bearing on our exploration of play's transformative potential.



The Four Corners of the Playground

In the context of play, the four quadrants highlight how individuals experience play, what behaviors are involved in the particular play form, the various cultural meanings associated with and created through the play, as well as the various systems and rules that define the play. We will call these four corners or essential features of the playground *the experience of play, the act of play, the meaning of play, and the structure of play* (see figure 2).

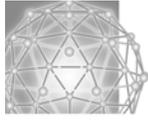
| | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| UPPER LEFT | UPPER RIGHT |
| Experiences of Play | Acts of Play |
| I | IT |
| WE | ITS |
| Meaning of Play | Structure of Play |
| LOWER LEFT | LOWER RIGHT |

Figure 2. The Four Quadrants of Play

The Experience of Play: This is the subjective dimension of the players. It includes the impulses, feelings, and images that arise constituting the experiences generated by play: from ecstatic, non-ordinary states of consciousness to the nausea, dizziness, and euphoria of vertiginous play. The research of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi helps identify the conditions for what he calls the Flow state, which is often associated with play.²⁹ Every phenomenological experience, intention, attitude, and response to the play constitutes the Experience of Play.

The Act of Play: This is the objective or behavioral dimension that occurs within the individual player, including the actions involved in play. Are people running and jumping or sitting and thinking? What physical positions are they in and how are they interacting? Are they sweating, breathing hard, laughing, and releasing hormones? All physical phenomena associated with the play form, including both the paraphernalia of play (toys, equipment, field) or the physiology and action of the player, constitute the Act of Play.

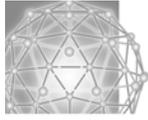
The Meaning of Play: This is the intersubjective or cultural dimension of play. Regardless of whether you are playing by yourself or with others, play takes place within a cultural context. This context is informed by overlapping layers of mutual understanding and resonance, language, and meaning. Play often involves various symbols, stories, norms, and ethics. These are all aspects of its intersubjectivity. In addition, play often involves the interaction of various



perspectives. As a result, it is not uncommon for either greater emotional bonds and affiliation to grow or conflicts and misunderstandings to occur. All interactions, whether they assert the needs of the individual or enhance the cohesion of the group, are part of the Meaning of Play.

The Structure of Play: This is the interobjective or systems dimension of the play. This aspect of play focuses on the way parts of the play fit together to create the play whole. Play is held together by various rules or “grammar” of interaction within the play space. Some play practices have very elaborate rules and others only one or two guidelines. Others play with the rules of the game, but even this form of trickster play abides by its own set of rules, which in turn are subject to further play. There are also various ways in which ecological and social systems can either support or constrict the play. All rules that define, underlie, support, or inhibit play belong to the Structure of Play.

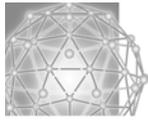
These four dimensions co-arise and are always present in any form of play. For a simple example, imagine a group of friends playing poker. Each person is having an experience while playing (Upper-Left quadrant), which might include anxiety, intuition, bluffing, and a wide range of somatic impulses. They are behaving (Upper-Right quadrant) in certain ways: taking turns, looking at their cards, drinking beer, and smoking cigarettes, etc. Their game is taking place in the context of the larger culture (Lower-Left quadrant) within which poker has a particular history, various symbols, stories constituting a distinct mythos, and association with certain types of people. In addition, this group of friends has formed their own subculture. They have played together most every Friday night for the past two years. There are intersubjective dynamics and specific meanings that have been established over time between them: Bob always brings the beer, Larry always has a joke that Al always thinks is funny, and Joe has learned how to read Bob’s hand. They experience mutual understanding (mostly about women) and misunderstandings (mostly about women) and have established certain norms. Finally, there are systems (Lower-Right quadrant) that govern their play, including the game itself, the rules for poker, and the events and institutions that make up the backdrop of their lives: the political climate, their educational status, their jobs, etc. As this simple example illustrates, the quadrants highlight, contain, and connect the myriad aspects of play (see figure 3 below).



| | |
|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">UPPER LEFT</p> <p>The Experience of Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Somatic• Emotional• Psychological• Phenomenological• Aesthetic• Spiritual | <p style="text-align: center;">UPPER RIGHT</p> <p>The Behavior of Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Biological• Scientific• Medical• Behavioral• Physiological |
| <p style="text-align: center;">LOWER LEFT</p> <p>The Meaning of Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cultural• Worldviews• Philosophical• Religious• Esoteric• Archetypal | <p style="text-align: center;">LOWER RIGHT</p> <p>The Systems of Play</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evolutionary• Ecological• Geographical• Social• Political• Economic |

Figure 3. Additional Aspects of Play

While, according to Integral Theory, these four perspectives are intrinsic to all occasions and inherent features of each moment, certain forms tend to emphasize, rely on, or be associated with one quadrant more than others. For example, a name game used as an ice-breaker in a newly formed group has a predominant intersubjective dimension—helping to make connections and form a feeling of cohesion in the group—while downhill skiing has primarily a behavioral dimension, even though it is pursued for the experience (see figure 4 below).



| | |
|--|---|
| <p>UPPER LEFT</p> <p>Experiential Play Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make believe • Thought experiments • Writing poetry, literature, or music • Making art • Koans and riddles • Paradox • Word games | <p>UPPER RIGHT</p> <p>Behavioral Play Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hobbies/collecting • Crafts • Gambling • Contest (with oneself) • Sport hunting/fishing • Ropes courses • Juggling, skateboarding, extreme sports, etc. |
| <p>LOWER LEFT</p> <p>Cultural Play Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Festivals and ritual • Cooperative games • Initiations • Concerts, exhibits • Performances • Community theater | <p>LOWER RIGHT</p> <p>Social Play Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team sports • Card and board games • Business performance incentives • Political power play • Online computer games • Stock markets |

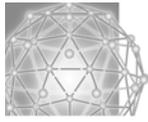
Figure 4. Forms of Play Within the Quadrants

This map is by no means comprehensive. However, it does show how organizing play forms according to their perspective can provide a better view of the ways play can enhance each domain and the impact each domain has on play. We can use this model to understand the relationship between categories offered by different play theorists as well.

Our example uses the work of philosopher Roger Caillois and contemporary theorist Brian Sutton-Smith. Caillois provided a taxonomy of play consisting of four categories: 1) *Mimesis* or simulation and make believe play; 2) *Ilinx* or vertiginous games; 3) *Alea* or games of chance; and 4) *Agon* or competitive games.³⁰ Each of these belongs in a different quadrant. In exploring the ambiguous relationship between play theories, Brian Sutton-Smith listed what he called the various “rhetorics” associated with different play theories. These include the rhetoric of *play as power*, *play as self*, *play as identity*, *play as frivolous*, *play as progress*, *play as imagination*, and *play as fate*.³¹

We elaborate on Sutton-Smith’s list by adding in parentheses, the historic cultural worldview associated with each.³²

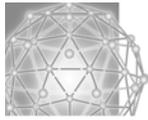
1. *Play as progress* (modern, rational worldview) usually applies to children’s play and advocates the notion that animals and children, not adults, adapt and develop through their play. Most educators over the past



two hundred years see playful imitation as a form of children's social, moral, and cognitive growth.

2. *Play as fate* (prerational, magical worldview) usually applies to play forms like gambling and rests on a belief that human lives and play are controlled by destiny and the Gods.
3. *Play as power* (prerational, agonistic worldview) usually applies to sports, athletics, and contests. It is about the use of play as the representation of conflict and as a way to fortify the status of those who control the play or are its heroes. It is as ancient as warfare and patriarchy.
4. *Play as identity*, (prerational, mythic worldview) usually applies to traditional and community celebrations and festivals. The play tradition is seen as a means of confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of the community of players.
5. *Play as the imaginary* (postmodern romantic worldview) usually applies to playful improvisation of all kinds, idealizing the flexibility and creativity of the animal and human play worlds.
6. *Play as "personal adventure" (our title), corresponding to Sutton-Smith's Rhetoric of the self* (modern, rational worldview), is usually applied to solitary activities and hobbies or high-risk phenomena like bungee jumping. These are forms of play in which play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players—their fun, their relaxation, their escape—and the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfactions of the play.
7. *Play as frivolous* (premodern, postmodern, and present) is usually applied to the activities of the idle or foolish. This is not just the Puritanic negative but also a term to be applied more to historical trickster figures and fools, who were once the central and carnivalesque persons who enacted playful protest against the orders of the ordained world. Here play is both marginalized by the culture, but also thrives at the margins, poking at the rules and societal norms from this privileged "outsider" position.

Using the quadrants, we can understand the horizontal relationship between Sutton-Smith's rhetorics and Caillois' categories (see figure 5 below).³³



| | |
|---|---|
| UPPER LEFT | UPPER RIGHT |
| <p>Experiential Play Practices</p> <p>Caillois</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mimesis (make believe) <p>Sutton-Smith</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play as Self (internal) • Play as Imagination | <p>Behavioral Play Practices</p> <p>Caillois</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ilinx (vertiginous) <p>Sutton-Smith</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play as Progress • Play as Self (extreme sports) |
| LOWER LEFT | LOWER RIGHT |
| <p>Cultural Play Practices</p> <p>Caillois</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alea (games of chance) <p>Sutton-Smith</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play as Identity • Play as Fate | <p>Social Play Practices</p> <p>Caillois</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agon (competitive games) <p>Sutton-Smith</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play as Power • Play as Frivolity |

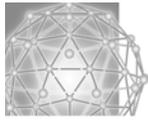
Figure 5. Caillois’ Forms and Sutton-Smith’s Rhetorics Within the Quadrants

Here we can see that Caillois’ forms and Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics reflect an emphasis on different dimensions of reality. But with only horizontal categories, it is still impossible to see their relationship to the evolution of consciousness. While we need a quadrant analysis to understand the domain we are playing in, with *merely* a quadrant analysis the playground remains flat. Using the quadrants alone, there is no way of telling whether the player is a crook or saint. In order to tell whether and how play transforms consciousness we need to add developmental dimensions to our map.

Part 3: Developmental Levels

Piaget was the first to identify the cognitive structures underlying each stage of development. He believed, however, that children do not develop new cognitive structures in play but merely incorporate new experiences into what they already know.³⁴ Child psychologists and play theorists have been contesting this claim ever since.³⁵

While Piaget’s developmental stages are also useful for understanding adult development, we have found almost no studies or literature directly exploring the role of play in adult development, especially in the levels of development beyond formal operations.³⁶ But we do know that development does not stop at adulthood. Adults develop through stages of



consciousness and, as with childhood, each stage can be associated with different forms of play. The adult's developmental level determines what kind of play is accessible and attractive to her.

Developmental stages are defined by the worldview each inhabits. We can begin to understand the worlds and worldviews associated with specific play modes by revisiting Sutton-Smith's rhetorics. To understand this logic, we start with the developmental scheme provided by the Integral model. The model is comprised of *at least* eight basic levels, which, for our purposes, we will associate with what we are calling the Play Selves. Each play self expresses itself in distinct ways and can be described in terms of the center and boundary of its identity. Beginning at an egocentric level, a play self develops through ethnocentric, worldcentric, Kosmocentric, and pneumacentric modes.³⁷ While there is a developmental relationship between each of the worldviews, albeit one that involves a complex holarchical envelopment, it is not a simple, progressive, linear, or hierarchical relationship. As the self moves through stages, the view from an earlier stage is typically negated. These complex issues will not be fully explored in this article.³⁸ Toward our purpose of understanding the developmental impact of play, we will explain each level, illustrate its contours, and describe the play forms that relate to it.

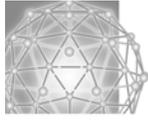
The Eight Play Selves are based on Susanne Cook-Greuter's and William Torbert's full spectrum Action-Inquiry research on postautonomous ego development.³⁹ Their research represents the most sophisticated and extensive full-spectrum (prepersonal, personal, postpersonal, and post-postpersonal) research available. It is worth noting that their levels closely coincide with the levels of Clare Graves' research on values development, as well as Beck and Cowan's Spiral Dynamics (SD) model of value systems.⁴⁰ Each play self has a unique way of relating to itself, other playmates, and the playground. In brief:⁴¹

The impulsive self is a Magical Player who connects with the cosmos by balancing dichotomous forces such as good and evil. They have a strong concern for creating safety and satisfying basic needs. The Magical Player has a sense of unlimited power combined with superstitious and magical notions. Their play is often highly repetitive. They view other people primarily as a source of self-gratification and feel confused and anxious by the complexity of the world.

The self-protective self is an Aggressive Player who is self-serving. Their play often takes the form of heroic acts. They identify the self in terms of its will, ideas, and wishes. Self-preservation is central. They project all their feelings and rarely self-reflect. They think globally with many judgments and simple ideas. They see other people as competitors for space, goods, and dominance and have little capacity for insight into self and others. They often cross other's boundaries in a crusade of low trust and hyper-vigilance. They experience the world as a dangerous place filled with perilous risk.

The conformist self is an Ordered Player who is rule-oriented and concerned with group membership. They define themselves through others. They have no stable and clear boundaries between the self and the group. Projection and introjection are their common defenses. They suppress negative feelings and overemphasize positive ones. They have a strong need to be accepted and to reject those who do not conform to the group. They view their world through a concrete-literal lens.

The conscientious self is a Status Player who is defined by their orientation toward linear causality, objective (third-person) thinking, and a newly emerging separate self-identity, which lends itself to competition for status. The self has greater independence and confidence. They



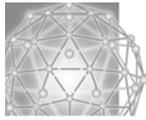
have an interest in their emotional life, though rationality is emphasized. They associate with others with similar goals and desires in life. They are drawn to achievement and accomplishing goals by being concise, efficient, and effective. They have a genuine interest in others, independent of their own needs and values. The world is experienced as predictable and measurable.

The individualistic self is a Sensitive Player who emphasizes connectivity between people, especially by sharing experiences, acknowledging contextual aspects of play (e.g., gender, class, race), and systemic dynamics of reality. They are aware of the observer and multiple viewpoints. They abandon objectivity and logic in favor of more holistic and organismic approaches. They value feelings and express them. They are aware of the conditioning dynamics of culture and context. They have the capacity to empathize with others and take their perspective. They understand their world is filled with diverse perspectives and competing truth claims.

The autonomous self is a Complex Player who welcomes chaos and multiple variables in service of self-development. The Complex Player understands the self as embedded in many contexts and dimensions. They accept many aspects of self through a complex psychology that integrates shadow material. They tolerate others in spite of their negative traits and differences of opinions or values. They experience their world as multidimensional with overlapping contexts and systems.

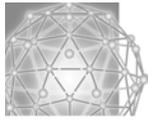
The construct-aware self is a Dynamic Player who integrates multimodal and multidimensional elements across contexts in service of humanity. They are aware of the subtle ways the ego filters experience. The Dynamic Player recognizes paradox and the limits of “mapping.” They desire to work through their own limits and blind spots and increase their capacity to witness themselves in the moment. They understand others in developmental terms and encounter them without judgment. They have a profound understanding of other’s complex and dynamic personalities. They experience the world as a place full of potential and paradox.

The ego-aware self is a Unitive Player who is a transparent manifestation of Being, completely spontaneous and open. They have stable access to transpersonal realities such as the capacity to witness all experience and keep their boundaries open. They view others as manifestations of Being. They experience the world as an immanent expression of timeless Spirit (see figure 6 below).



| Center of Identity | Play Selves | Style of Play | Examples | Worldview/ Cook-Greuter/ Piaget |
|----------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Pneumacentric | Unitive Player Play as Lila | Spontaneous, witnessing, highly creative, original, and open | Identification with the play of the world. Improvisation at psycho-spiritual levels. Crazy wisdom, Tantra, and playing with luminosity. Unites deterministic and free, structured and open, chaos and order | Trans-personal Ego- and Const.-aware |
| Kosmocentric | Dynamic Player Play as transformative | Multimodal and multidimensional | Improvisation with transformation. Meditation, holotropic breathwork, inquiry | Post-post-personal Integrated |
| Worldcentric | Complex Player Play as chaos | Fast and unpredictable | Improvisation with the world, improvisational movement and theater, multidimensional simulations, virtual reality | Post-personal Autonomous |
| Worldcentric | Sensitive Player Play as cooperation | Connecting and sharing | Name games, rope courses, New Games, team building exercises | Post-personal Individualistic |
| Sociocentric | Status Player Play as competition | Winning and losing | Video games, gambling, poker, competitive sports, games at fairs and carnivals, rope courses (transitional) | Personal Conscientious Piaget: Form-Op |
| Ethnocentric | Ordered Player Play as structure | Following the rules | Board games, collecting things, hobbies, card games, intellectual games, Mensa | Personal Conformist Piaget: Con-Op |
| Egocentric | Aggressive Player Play as conquest | Acts of heroism | Survivor, war games, chicken, drinking games, boxing/fights | Pre-personal Self-protective Piaget: Pre-op |
| Egocentric | Magical Player Play as connection to cosmos | Balancing good and evil | Dungeons and Dragons, fantasy games, divination: Runes, Tarot, magic tricks, charms, rituals | Pre-personal Impulsive Piaget: Sensorimotor |

Figure 6. The Eight Play Selves



Each play self becomes capable of and attracted to qualitatively different types of play. Its worldview has a language of its own and defines what is and is not play differently. For example, an Ordered Player enjoys playing when the rules are clear and people follow them, whereas a Sensitive Player finds more value in play that connects people regardless of whether the rules are defined or obeyed.

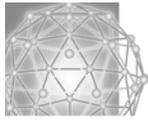
It is important to recognize that each play form does not strictly correlate with a particular worldview but can be played from within a wide range of perspectives. The Dalai Lama might enjoy a game of poker as much as Mike Tyson but from within a different worldview. That said, generally speaking, each developmental stage really only deeply enjoys the forms of play that match their own and prior stages of development. In other words, each developmental stage transcends and includes the play forms of the prior ones. Playing games that emerge out of stages far more developed than our own simply has no appeal. We often cannot imagine why anybody would enjoy them. A Status Player is as interested in play that helps liberate all beings as a Magical Player is in playing the stock market.

The levels of development also reflect different centers of concern and identity. Each establishes the locus of complexity in the generation of motivation, intention, and scope of engagement (i.e., with whom, for what, and why we are playing). In egocentric play, which includes the Magical and Aggressive Player, the player considers the other an object and plays only for the benefit of him/herself. In ethnocentric play, which includes Ordered Play, the player plays to be part of the group and to strengthen the bonds of community. In the next stage, sociocentric play, which includes Status Play, the player plays to win, whether for him/herself or for a larger affiliation such as one's company or country. In worldcentric play, which includes the Sensitive and Complex Players, play occurs in service, whether directly or indirectly to humanity and the inclusion of the diversity of play members. In Kosmocentric play, which includes the Dynamic Players, people play to transform themselves in service of self, other, and world. In pneumacentric play, Unitive Players play with and for the purpose of liberating all beings.

As figure 6 illustrates, specific play forms tend to reinforce, reflect, and support specific worldviews. Ordered Players are at the concrete operational stage of cognition and therefore enjoy board games because they appreciate that all players are held accountable to the same rules. Status Players, at the formal operations level of cognition, prefer more individualistic or abstract play like rock climbing or entrepreneurial business ventures. They like play that allows them to express, assert, and be rewarded for their individuality.

Since anybody can engage in the same activity but for very different reasons and from very different perspectives, it is not uncommon for players in the same game to represent a broad range of developmental levels. As a result, they may have different needs, goals, and views of their mutual play. If a Status Player and a Sensitive Player are both playing a game of lawn darts, the former will probably be striving to win while the latter will probably be seeking connection. This might work as long as the Status Player wins, but even so, the difference in worldviews can lead to conflicts or misunderstandings, should the Status Player lose too often or the Sensitive Player's need for connection remain unsatisfied.

The quality, subtlety, and nature of the same play form may also change when engaged from different developmental stages. For example, from the perspective of the Aggressive Player, sexual play is an act of domination and control. For the Sensitive Player, it is an act of intimacy. For the Unitive Player, it is an act of communion with the divine. As development increases,



sensitivity increases in the physical, emotional, and spiritual body, making deeper communion possible. Sex can be a pre-personal, personal, or transpersonal play encounter depending on the level of development of the players.⁴²

As we see in the diagram, Piaget’s stages of play help describe the cognitive development of the first four play selves with Magical and Aggressive Play correlating with the preoperational stage, Ordered Play with the concrete operational stage, and Status Play with the formal operational stage. These first four stages make it possible to describe and understand approximately 85% of the human population, which exists within prepersonal and personal modes of being.⁴³ However, that leaves out the 15% who are manifesting postpersonal and transpersonal forms and perspectives of play. These play forms and perspectives are at the leading edge of our evolutionary potential and must be included in any full topography of play, which is why Cook-Greuter’s developmental research is so helpful to an Integral approach to play.

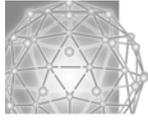
Sutton-Smith’s work comes closer than any other play theorist’s in recognizing the full spectrum of play, though he limits his interpretation to include only the ancient (prepersonal) and modern (personal) stages of development. What is striking to us about this cartography is that it correlates very strongly with an understanding of ego development in individuals and worldview development in cultures and communities.

Yet Sutton-Smith appears to be unaware that his framework provides suggestive evidence for the evolutionary unfolding of play perspectives. So, while a strict interpretation through a developmental lens of Sutton-Smith’s would not be justified, given that he is using his categories in a much looser sense, his work does bring us closer to understanding the relationship between individual and collective development in the context of play forms and theories. A developmental perspective not only shows a vertical relationship between these worldviews but also reveals the logic that connects them. We expand the interpretation of some of the rhetorics to reflect their presence in postpersonal and transpersonal stages of development and their correlations with the play selves (see figure 7 below).

| Developmental Stage | Play Rhetoric | Play Self |
|---------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Transpersonal | Play as frivolity | Unitive Player Dynamic Player |
| Post-personal | Play as Self Play as imagination | Complex Player Sensitive Player |
| Personal | Play as self & Play as progress Play as identity | Status Player Ordered Player |
| Pre-personal | Play as power Play as fate | Aggressive Player Magical Player |

Figure 7. Play Rhetorics in the Developmental Model

The rhetoric of *play as fate*, *power*, and some aspects of *play as identity* and *frivolity* all fit within the prepersonal worldview. Play as identity can be as true for a mythic culture centered

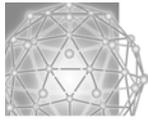


around festivals and rituals as it is in a highly bureaucratic culture centered around loyalty to the firm and its membership in the country club, regular golfing, and barbeque parties, etc. Play as frivolity is really the play of the outsider, children, crazy people, the elderly, or marginalized racial groups at any developmental stage. The rhetoric of *play as self* and *play as progress* as well as aspects of *play as identity* primarily express the personal worldview, while some aspects of the *play of imagination* and again *frivolity* express postpersonal worldviews. In a postpersonal expression of *play as imagination*, the identity is expanded through the imagination. We imagine playing with creatures very different from ourselves, whether they are children of future generations or non-human species.⁴⁴ The *play of Self* (capital "S"), to expand Sutton-Smith's original category, is another postpersonal worldview that deliberately expands the sense of identity and includes meditation, breathwork, inquiry, or psychotropic drug use, to name a few. Aspects of Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of frivolity reaches transpersonal dimensions in its ability to play with any rules of the game, including those of rational discourse or even, ultimately, physics. The remarkable correlations between the play rhetorics and the play selves serve to highlight that Sutton-Smith's work has an implicit developmental dimension.

The Dignity and the Disaster

It is important to realize that even though each stage represents an increase in consciousness, each play self can have both a healthy and an unhealthy expression. With development comes power and the potential to use it for the benefit or the detriment of ongoing play. While the dignity can be greater for each stage, so can the disaster. We do not develop in linear progression equally through all lines of development (as we will discuss below). Some lines develop more quickly than others and provide resources that can be co-opted by less developed aspects of the self. Increasing capacities for complex play brings mastery over greater dimensions of experience and behavior. We can use this mastery in the service of greater play for all or it can supply the narcissistic needs of a less developed or egocentric aspect of the self. For example, the shadow of Sensitive Play is its intolerance toward people who do not like to bond through play. There is arguably less virtue in the disaster of this more developed expression than in the dignity of the less developed Status Player who encourages an individual to trust herself on a ropes course.

The play self is in its dignity when the play serves the freedom and increasing potential for play and playfulness. The disaster of each play self occurs when the quadrants are not well balanced and play gets enlisted into the service of a few aspects at the expense of others. An activity stops being play when it loses either its voluntary nature either for the player (through compulsion, habit, or unconsciousness) or for the participants (when they become objects of derision). In its dignity, a play self plays with the world as a subject, while in its disaster it plays with the world as an object (see figure 8 below).



| Play Selves | Disaster |
|--------------------------|---|
| Unitive Player | Manipulation of subtle energies and people’s spiritual longings for personal gain |
| Dynamic Player | Manipulation of the complexity of the situation for unfair personal gain |
| Complex Player | Using awareness of others’ weakness against them |
| Sensitive Player | Intolerance of lack of participation |
| Status Player | Being deceptive, opportunistic, manipulating others for their own gain |
| Ordered Player | Rigidity, exclusivity, intolerance of individuality |
| Aggressive Player | Cruelty, incapacity for empathy |
| Magical Player | Unnecessarily suspicious |

Figure 8. The Disasters of Play Selves

All eight of the play selves have strengths and weaknesses. They all have an appropriate play ethos within their worldview and the capacity to be unplayful. Making the distinction between the “dignity and disaster” of each play self can provide a nuanced framework for analyzing play.

As we have already seen, play possibilities develop along at least two different axes. Horizontal play broadens the range or diversity of play forms, while vertical play increases the complexity. Horizontal play forms may generate skills, discovery, art, humor, or simply provide relief and release, but they do so from within the same level of consciousness, maintaining and broadening rather than deepening the players’ range of movement. Vertical play, on the other hand, transforms the player, the playmate(s), and the playground by widening the identity and sensitivity of the self and community.

Each stage represents new degrees of freedom to play in an expanded playground, having “cast off” the constraints of the prior level. The more we develop, the more we open to and identify with the deep play that is at the core of reality. As the player evolves, facets of the self which were once suppressed, unconscious, or latent blossom into play, increasingly integrating the whole self and the whole of the world. Our participation in the world is a function of our freedom, which is the same as our capacity to play. As we develop we can engage more (play)fully, joyfully, and effectively in the world. The playground grows both wider and deeper and the range of movement, interest, and capacity to respond creatively and playfully also increases. Identified with an egoic self, we play to increase possibilities only for ourselves, but



when identified with a larger life, our play increases the possibilities for all of life, until the self and all of existence converge in the ecstatic play of evolution itself.

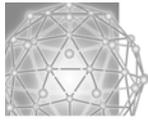
As the playground grows deeper, our freedom increases. The degree of freedom relates to the number of things with which the player is dis-identified. So the self at one stage becomes an object of play for the self at the next stage. As the playground grows wider, more of the self and world are embraced in play, and the fullness of being increases. According to Integral Theory, evolution entails both the movement toward fullness that is impelled by Agape and the movement toward freedom impelled by Eros.

Lines of Development

In the Integral model, stages of development occur within lines of development. These are the particular capacities, sensitivities, or intelligences that comprise consciousness. As we transform, our sensitivity increases and as we cultivate sensitivities we transform. Sensitivity defines what we can perceive and how we respond.

Through play, we open to a broader range of experiences than we normally allow. New experiences challenge us to develop new sensitivities. Play increases sensitivity by expanding the bounds of our experience and providing opportunities to experiment with different perspectives and responses. The following diagram provides examples of some of the capacities play helps cultivate. These include sensitivity to ourselves (emotions), each other (interpersonal), the good (morality), the true (cognition), and the beautiful (aesthetics).⁴⁵ Because of the embodied nature of much play, we also add to this list the sensitivity to movement (kinesthetic). Different play forms help develop different capacities and contribute unique features to play and our development (see figure 9 below).

While we include the sense of timing in the capacity of movement, timing is best understood as a combination of a number of different lines and capacities, including the kinesthetic, aesthetic, cognitive, and interpersonal. These capacities are combined in different ways depending on the context. For example, the timing of a well-placed joke in social situations requires different sensitivity than the timing of a batter hitting a baseball or the timing of a dramatic theater piece. Timing is crucial to play. The more complex consciousness is, the more capable it is of skillful, appropriate, and beautiful timing. Bill Torbert emphasizes the importance and developmental dimension of timing in his notion of “timely action,” which is an expression of Dynamic Play.⁴⁶



| Capacity | Play Forms | Effect |
|--|--|---|
| Emotional “How do I feel?” | Hobbies, imagination, solo adventures, expressive arts, sharing | Play enables us to safely explore vulnerable emotional states and open to the impulse life. |
| Interpersonal “How should I interact?” | Social play, rough and tumble games, telling jokes, festivals | Play requires restraint, cooperation, and awareness of others’ comfort threshold. Play increases the capacity to take the role of the other. |
| Moral “What is right?” | Competitive and cooperative games, team sports, gambling, card and board games, thought experiments | Play teaches us to do what is good for the play. Cheating compromises play. The game can only be played if rules are followed and the players serve the play community. The more cooperation a play mode requires, the more it develops morality. |
| Cognitive “What is?” | Scientific exploration and discovery, observation, debate, role-playing, perspective taking, riddles, mind games | Exploratory play allows us to explore questions and take perspectives. Through play we discover the patterns and principles that create a sense of coherence in our world |
| Aesthetic “What is beautiful?” | The arts, improvisation, make believe, interior decorating, theater, cinematography, writing | Play cultivates a sense of symmetry, grace, economy, originality, and focus that make an object beautiful, makes play playful. |
| Kinesthetic “How do I move?” | Miming, improvisation, sports, dance, movement, ropes courses | Play occurs within a flow of engagement in which the timing either maintains or detracts from the flow. Timing determines the effectiveness of any performative act. |

Figure 9. Lines of Development and Play

All these sensitivities form the basis of both good play and a healthy world. Here we get a clearer sense of the integrative function of play. Through the capacities it cultivates we are able to play more harmoniously within ourselves and with others.

Consciousness evolves toward increasing capacity for creative participation in greater dimensions of reality. In other words, evolution moves toward increasing playfulness in an expanded playground. As we have already discovered, we develop to become more harmonized and differentiated individuals with more flexible and integrated psyches capable of perceiving and playing with greater dimensions of reality. That is, we come to resemble and align ourselves increasingly with the play that is at the core of life and become freer to live life as play. Spiritual liberation (Unitive Play) is the awakening to all of life as play.



Part 4: Transforming Through Play

Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race.

—H. G. Wells⁴⁷

The universe has been evolving for 14 billion years, transforming space and time into everything imaginable. The same force that moves worlds, grows lungs on fish, and makes apes stand upright is at play developing our consciousness. Whether we seek transformation in the company of a teacher or dig in our heels and have another drink, in the infinite play of the Kosmos, our evolution is as inevitable as the sun going supernova. We may not be able to stop it, but we do have the unique ability to play with it, to speed it up or slow down the process of evolution within our own psyche. In the self-reflective human, the universe has evolved a level of complexity in which consciousness itself has become both the player and the object of play. We are uniquely capable of consciously raising our own consciousness.

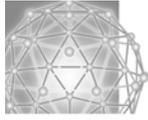
So why do we not just go ahead and evolve, full steam ahead? Because to transform we have to loosen our grip on the structures that define us, and there is nothing we guard more fiercely. At the same time, a powerful exploratory drive impels us to venture from the familiar in search of new vistas, greater freedom, and fuller being.⁴⁸ The principles of expansion (a.k.a. innovation, exploration, and chaos) and conservation, (a.k.a. homeostasis, structure, and order) exist in dynamic tension everywhere in the Kosmos, including our psyche. There would not even be a Kosmos if the two were not in constant play.

We may love the variety of play but we resist change. We hold onto the structures that we believe are holding us together. The Buddha taught that attempting to maintain a fixed and separate identity in the midst of the flux and interconnectedness of existence is the cause of suffering. It is not easy going against the grain of the whole universe, but it can, and often does take a lot of suffering for us to be willing to endure the challenges of transformation. We may face a major crisis like losing our health and loved ones or hit bottom in an addictive downspin. We may have a crisis of success, discovering that achieving our goals did not bring the happiness we expected. On the other hand, we may be motivated not by suffering but by the inspiration of a teacher, a peak experience, or the intuition that there is more to life. Once we taste the freedom, richness, meaning, and playfulness of relating at new levels, we become more willing to endure the inevitable transformations that await us. Whether we are pulled by the carrot or pushed by the stick, evolution keeps the play going.

We have seen that playfulness increases with consciousness, but does play also generate transformation? In light of our Integral understanding, we can further explore three aspects of play's transformative nature: 1) the state of playfulness that supports transformation; 2) the general characteristics of play that are conducive to or specifically generate transformation; and 3) the forms of play that directly lead to transformation.

The State of Playfulness

States can have many different kinds of impact on stages. They can provide glimpses of more advanced levels and whet the appetite for development. They can provide needed relief, releasing pressure built up within the constraints of a level. They can become the basis for structures that reify the worldview of a level. They can also provide support for transformation.



After all, our state determines our openness to change and the degree of openness has enormous bearing on our development. It is our hypothesis that the openness, flexibility, and full engagement of playfulness is the state most conducive to transformation.

Most organisms do not need states of playfulness to support their transformation because their psyche is not developed enough to exert any substantial resistance. As we evolve toward increasing freedom, we are free to either enhance or inhibit our evolution. Because there is nothing we guard more than our sense of self, we tend to use our freedom in order to block our transformation. But the same freedom that enables us to avoid or postpone our transformation also makes our play possible.

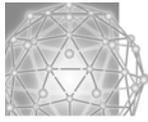
While we may not be motivated to transform, we are motivated to play. The joy of play can be a lure and incentive for transformation, just as the pleasure of sex can be an incentive for reproduction. When life exerts pressure on us to reexamine our limiting concepts and beliefs, we usually resist. In our play, however, we gladly take a break from the very same identity, concepts, and beliefs we normally defend. Play opens the back door to transformation, letting it sneak past the guards and throw a party in the control room.

In the full absorption and excitement of our play, we find a temporary freedom, no matter what the circumstances of our lives may be. For at least a few moments, we can trust life, laugh at ourselves, and delight in the challenges we face. And what a relief it is to stop taking ourselves so seriously, to lighten up and feel how safe, easy, and fun it is to be alive. Play can override self-consciousness, displace anger, anxiety, and fear. It brings a sense of spaciousness, ease, and lightheartedness to the defended, rigidified, and stuck aspects of ourselves, until they have loosened up and joined the play.

We cannot over estimate the value of the enthusiasm and zest for life that comes from play. The sheer ecstasies of play increase our desire to be alive, to stay in the game, keep playing, and transforming. The Eros of play—the will to live—sustains the whole Kosmos. When we enjoy being alive and are not so afraid to fail or make fools of ourselves, we are more likely to succeed. Play taps into resources of energy, skill, and intelligence that are not normally available to us when we are taking ourselves seriously. Experiments show how levels of innovation and output among engineers and designers can be boosted by creating more playful, more relaxed work environments.⁴⁹ Couples also use playfulness to broach difficult topics, such as sex or money, that might be too awkward to engage in with seriousness.⁵⁰

Since the evolution of consciousness moves toward increasing playfulness, the state of playfulness at any stage of development gives us a glimpse of our unbounded true nature. In play we release some degree of control and striving. Once we stop striving, we discover the freedom that is possible no matter what the circumstances of our lives may be. In this state of relaxation and openness, we can explore new ways of being. The best spiritual teachers are ones that playfully remind us to stop taking ourselves so seriously and to unburden our practice from so much significance. When you start to get serious about spiritual development is right when you need to lighten up. When we become playful we become available for our transformation.

Play opens us directly and exuberantly into the present moment in which the playground is always available and everyone and everything is a playmate. No matter what our stage of development, we have access to our playful true nature, and as our consciousness evolves, this state becomes anchored as a stage.



The Transformative Characteristics of Play

The Play Leap

We began this article by describing how play, at its best, can be transformative, but how does it affect the evolution of consciousness? According to Harvard education professor Robert Kegan, consciousness transforms when the subject of awareness becomes the object of awareness; that is, when we are able to perceive the lens through which we see the world through another, more expanded lens.⁵¹ Most work on play characterizes it as a set of features that shift the frame of activity from one domain to another through the meta-message that “this is play.”⁵² Generally, this bracketing is meant as the shift from reality to a new play-specific space/time with its own rules of procedure. The indeterminate frame brackets the determinate frame, thus shifting identification toward greater freedom. Playfulness is the attitude that makes this shift possible. It enables us to step outside of and then manipulate interpretive frames from the perspective of another.

Through play we do not learn so much the content of perspectives and behaviors as that there are sorts and categories of perspectives and behavior, and that these sorts and categories can be manipulated, can support each other (science and discovery), transform each other (art), or cancel each other out (comedy).⁵³ When we are able to step back from one categorical level to see and play with it from that of another, we begin the process of transformation. By becoming aware of the limitations of our perspectives, we can throw off their constraints to become not just the subject of our experience but also the witness and player of experience.

Play detaches messages, experiences, or objects from their original context, creating a new frame that allows for greater freedom, interactivity, and creative possibilities. When we throw off the constraints of a given context, we are free to move, to engage with new contexts as well as objectify the context of our recent experience.

The paradox of play as well as its transformative power lay in the fact that the player must hold at least two contextual frames at once—the frame of the player and that of the play, or the “real” and the “unreal.” Systems-thinker Gregory Bateson describes how the meta-communication needed among players to establish that “this is play” enables them to discover new “possibilities for thinking.”⁵⁴ Play and other types of reframing thus prevent the organism from being trapped within one set of interpretive procedures. Discovering new interpretive procedures is at the core of the development of consciousness.

Playing God

In straddling, or, as Gadamer would put it, moving “to and fro” across the boundary between the framer and the frame, we momentarily identify with both simultaneously. The idea of the framer within a spiritual context is referred to by the traditions as either the “absolute,” “nondual,” “Creator,” “Godhead,” or “Being,” while the frame, in turn, is termed variously as the “relative,” “duality,” “creation,” and “Becoming.” Identifying simultaneously both as the framer and the frame, player and playmate, or creator and creation enables us to be both fully engaged while also detached from results. When we see life as play (“lila,” illusion) we are free to jump right in. After all, there is nothing to lose.

To see the world as play cultivates wisdom, while participating in the world as playmates cultivates compassion. In the paradox of play, passion and non-attachment reinforce and support each other. As Sutton-Smith puts it, “the players, although they are only pretending that nothing



really matters in one sense, are, in another sense, extremely and seriously excited about the validity of their own performances within the play paradigm.”⁵⁵ Non-attachment gives us the wisdom while passion provides the motivation needed to participate fully. Seeing clearly that the world is play does not remove us from the world, it enables us to jump in and risk everything, delighting in whatever arises. As the famous Indian mystic and Unitive Player Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj wrote, “Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between these two banks, my life flows.”⁵⁶ Between these two frames the infinite player plays.

Normalizing Risk

The word “play” comes from an early Indo-European root *plegan*, meaning “to risk.” There is no play without risk. To be willing to play is to risk failure, humiliation, and rejection. When we know it is “only play,” we leap at the opportunity, but when we are not playing, we will carefully avoid it. Play makes the risk and therefore the possibility of transformation not only possible but also enjoyable.

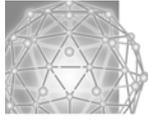
Holding the paradox that something is simultaneously what it represents and not what it represents enables the player to engage an obstacle to play, however terrifying it may be, without risking a full loss of control. The implicit or explicit limits that bind play in space and time make it safe for the player to follow the playful urge, take chances, try on new roles, and attempt tasks that, under normal circumstance, might seem too difficult or unpleasant. It is a place where the novelty and risk of a new situation or experience only add to the intensity and pleasure of play. The player is able to be in control of being out of control and so enjoys both a sense of risk and of mastery simultaneously.

Sutton-Smith offers the theory that all play is a parody of emotional vulnerability, which enables primary emotions that threaten to overwhelm the player in everyday life to be engaged in a special context free of long-term consequences. “The contention is that (human) play is most fundamentally about a hidden emotional dialectic of stress versus non-stress.”⁵⁷ The stress comes from the arousal of involuntary primary emotions like anger, fear, shock, disgust, loneliness, and egomania.

Sutton-Smith contends that in play, each emotion is evoked without being fully experienced is then met with a secondary emotion such as strategy, courage, resilience, imagination, sociability, and charisma. This provides the player with a sense of mastery over the primary emotion. For example, contests parody the emotion of anger at attack and provide the opportunity to express mastery by eliciting strategies and skill, while extreme sports parody fear and provide the opportunity for courage to master the fear. Sutton-Smith defines play as

A virtual simulation characterized by staged contingencies of variation, with opportunities for control engendered by either mastery or further chaos. Clearly the primary motive of players is...[to] mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and, in so doing, engage the propensities of mind, body, and cells in exciting forms of arousal.⁵⁸

It makes sense, then, that a player is often attracted to the play forms that engage the particular vulnerabilities that limit or inhibit their playfulness and because the emotional tension it addresses matches those that they face in everyday life. If the player works in cut-throat competitive environments, he or she may be drawn to cut-throat competitive sports in order to unleash anger and aggression without risking losing their job. Many people who are drawn to



gambling identify themselves as losers in their daily lives. Gambling, for them, is a way to choose and have control over their losing, thus in some sense feeling the empowerment of winning.⁵⁹ The player chooses the forms that engage and master the existential stresses, which tend to block playfulness in daily life.

Play also provides a way of exploring the player's developmental edges in a way that enables them to put boundaries around what they are willing to risk. Within these boundaries the player can take leaps beyond their ordinary comfort to experience a wider variety of realities. New realities dislodge the player from familiar identities, enabling them to encounter difficult material with support and ease, to venture into their growing edge, and integrate a wider spectrum of emotional responses. It engenders the optimism needed to take risks and shows that taking risks can bring rewards.

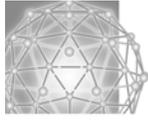
Play and Holding

In his classic book, *Play and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott proposes that our capacity for play depends on the strength and reliability of our childhood holding environment; that is, the extent to which we were mirrored, secure, and loved as children.⁶⁰ Whether from the love of a caregiver, the support of a structured environment, or the strength of our ego structures, the sense of being held and safe is the ground from which we leap into play. As Erik Erikson wrote, "to truly leap you must learn to use the ground as a springboard, and how to land resiliently. It means to test the leeway allowed by given limits; to outdo, but not escape gravity."⁶¹ Our sense of being held, safe, and cared for gives us the ground from which we leap into play.

While we play to the extent that we feel held, we can also play our way toward a greater sense of holding. By providing a temporary structure that shelters us from serious consequences, play can help restore a sense of safety and wellbeing that is otherwise threatened. Continuity of play in the face of other disruptions affirms that our relationships with our playmates and our own playful nature can withstand a temporary upheaval in our circumstances.

Play also creates safety by engendering play in others who may have otherwise been a real or perceived threat. By communicating that we are playful, safe, open, and friendly, we invite a friendly response. Smiles and laughter, the signals and sounds of play, disarm us, lubricate our social encounters, and create a sense of safety.⁶² A remarkable example of the way playfulness can create safety occurs regularly with Alaskan Huskies who happen to find themselves in the unfortunate path of a Polar Bear. The dogs that express the conventional responses of alarm and fear are certain to become food. The occasional playful dog that greets the polar bear with a play bow opens the possibility to become a playmate.⁶³ With an irresistible enough invitation, everyone will eventually join the play.

The same dynamic takes place within our psyches. Playfulness can disarm aspects of our personalities that have become menacing and defended and invite them to join the community of play. Each developmental stage has different ways of establishing safety. At each stage, the boundaries of the self expand to include more of the world, while the center of the self, the capacity for grounded presence, strengthens to hold it. Those with weak internal structures use external forms, rules, and institutions, holding onto them rigidly for support. To the extent that the center supports us, we do not have to hold back from or attempt to control the world.



Transformative Forms of Play

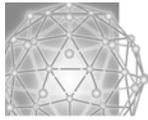
Transitional Zones

Because play provides a safe way to engage risk, the first step toward experimenting with a new way of being is likely to be through play. As we explore transformative play, it is important to remember that we each dwell simultaneously in different stages for different lines of development. We may be Sensitive Players at church and Aggressive Players in traffic. Within our own psyche clamors a community of playmates who all hold different worldviews. At least part of our evolutionary path is to learn to express and harmonize these players into the community of our selves and the world.

At each level of development the Player, the Playmate, and the Playground is transformed. The play self of one level becomes the play object of the next level. The Ordered Player transforms into the Status Player in such a way that the desire and need to “follow the rules” that defined the Ordered Player no longer defines the Status Player, which can and often follows the rules but can also break them if in service of establishing status. What was subject, or rule following, has now become object, or rule following as an aspect of play not the basis of play. Thus, each subsequent Play Self has the potential to be more playful than the previous one because it is playing on a larger Playground. Play becomes more complex, includes more dimensions, and involves more qualities and capacities.

While the play forms of more developed stages are almost unintelligible to those of less developed stages, the play modes just beyond our own level tend to be very attractive to us. We often dip a toe into them in the same way that we might have, as children, peeked ahead to the math or spelling problems for the next grade or watched older kids ride bikes without training wheels. Those skills just beyond our abilities intrigue us, stirring our evolutionary appetites and pulling us toward them. The play forms that can bridge developmental levels support the transition between developmental play selves (see figure 10 below).

The Magical Player might use divination and superstition when gambling, while also tasting the individual success of Aggressive Players. Aggressive Players can practice cunning and survival tactics within the context of competitive sports while learning to work as an ordered team.



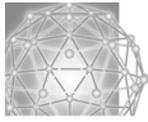
| Transition Zone | Transitional Play |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Dynamic to Unitive Player | Koans, paradox |
| Complex to Dynamic Player | Meditation, Action Inquiry, spontaneity |
| Sensitive to Complex Player | Improvisation, Bohmian Dialogue, collaborative art projects |
| Status to Sensitive Player | Cooperative Games, rope courses, the arts |
| Ordered to Status Player | Stock market, business competitions |
| Aggressive to Ordered Player | Competitive sports, fair and party games |
| Magical to Aggressive Player | Gambling, betting on results |

Figure 10. Transitional Play Forms

Improvisation

Improvisation resembles life more than any other form of play. As consciousness develops and we inhabit more complexity with greater ease, our play naturally becomes less structured and more integrated into daily life. The surprises that might upset a Structured Player and become obstacles to play are the very basis of play for the Dynamic Player. The freedom that comes with the development of consciousness is the increasing capacity to greet the unexpected turns of life as play and to improvise, dancing artfully with whatever shows up. Improvisational play forms, including drama, movement, art, and music, all help develop the capacity to play with the uncertainty and complexity of life as a whole. Simple structures provide the support and impetus for players to leap into play with spontaneous inventions that keep the play going. As Viola Spolin noted, in improvisation “players grow agile and alert, ready and eager for any unusual play as they respond to the many random happenings simultaneously.”⁶⁴ Improvisation helps us learn to function as a total self, able to access and express the many facets of our being in the context of an unpredictable world.

Perhaps the single most powerful tool of improvisation is the all-encompassing rule of “yes, and....” This deceptively simple key has the power to opens doors to vast arenas of play. Originally introduced by the improvisational theater pioneer, Keith Johnstone, the principle of “yes, and...” is the practice of welcoming everything that is said and done on stage without resistance or “blocks” and incorporating it seamlessly into the flow of the scene.⁶⁵ Everything that arises in a scene becomes part of the players’ mutually generated world to be added to creatively. Part of the brilliance of the principle is the practical wisdom that while resistance is the only block to play, even resistance can be welcomed into the play. In improvisation, players learn that accepting every offer moves the scene forward, enabling not only a world to come into shape but its characters to be changed. This principle is also at the heart of play at its best.



In the context of infinite play, “yes, and...” is a powerful spiritual practice, bringing surrender and will and integration and differentiation into balance. With a deep “yes” to life as it arises within and around us, we enter the Playground. Followed with “and” we add our spontaneous, authentic response. As our consciousness evolves, the “yes” includes more of the world and the “and” offers more of ourselves. “Yes, and...” is a playful posture toward life as a whole allowing us to leap into the Playground and keep generating and enlivening the possibilities for more play.

Playing with Consciousness

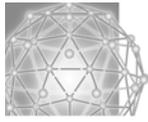
Finally, perhaps the most direct route for eager transformers are the myriad practices designed specifically to play with consciousness and the self. These forms focus on developing the capacity to witness, investigate, and play with subjective states as objects of awareness. Meditation practices cultivate the capacity to release identification with all thoughts and sensations allowing them to arise and pass without hindrance. Such witnessing practices strengthen the capacity to welcome and extend a “yes” to all phenomena as it arises. It enables the meditator to hold and welcome any aspect of experience as a possible playmate.

Inquiry practice as developed in the Diamond Approach work by A. H. Almaas, for instance, is another example of a technique for tracking thoughts and sensations as objects.⁶⁶ Inquiry guides awareness to the roots of the blocks to play and then enables these blocks to naturally unwind within the field of acceptance. In these cases, bringing consciousness to subtler and deeper dimensions of experience helps create expansive states and strengthen our ability to see all phenomena as objects of awareness. It also helps shift the players from identification with the frame of experience to identification as the framer of experience.

Psychospiritual pioneers have developed a growing number of techniques in the past few decades that enable people to play with and expand the psyche. A particularly playful process focuses on playing with the many facets of the self from the perspective of the framer. Voice Dialogue developed by Hal and Sidra Stone’s and the Big Mind process developed by Genpo Roshi, for example, guide the participant in exploring different perspectives or subpersonalities that inhabit the psyche, thus reinforcing the identity of the framer as distinct from their perspectives within the frame. It also invites participants to inhabit and say “yes” to new perspectives, especially those aspects of ourselves that we resist and project onto others. We learn to retrieve, make conscious, and integrate this disowned perspective into the community of the self, freeing more of the self to play.

The innovative work of Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy and activist John Seed have designed exercises that enable participants to leap across boundaries of time and species. In the Council of all Beings, each person adopts and gives voice to the perspective of a different species in a council advising the Human.⁶⁷ Macy has also developed exercises that help participants inhabit the perspective of children of future generations and seek advice, guidance, and inspiration from their felt presence within the participant. These are powerful transpersonal tools that help widen our identification through space and time while cultivating what Macy calls the “moral imagination.”⁶⁸ Here, the expression and dramatic enactment of the imagination expands the sphere of identification. Many who have experienced these exercises are galvanized into action from a radically widened perspective.

Exercises that widen our identification with the larger living world, the dead, and the unborn have gained popularity recently (i.e., shamanic journeying and vision quests). There is some legitimate concern about whether these encourage a regression to earlier prepersonal stages of



development or expose us to transpersonal stages, and whether they contribute to or impede our development. In prepersonal perspectives, we are undifferentiated from the whole, while in transpersonal perspectives we are both differentiated as individuals and identified with a larger whole. For these practices and exercises to be transformative requires that we also attend to the unfolding of our individuality.

Integral Transformative Play

Since it should be clear by now that play is integral to transformation, we might well wonder how to make it integral to our lives. Integral transformative play has at least four dimensions: 1) getting into a playful state to support the journey; 2) playing in all quadrants of the Integral model; 3) playing with the obstacles to play as they arise; 4) recognizing the play that is always already going on around and within us; and 5) playing in ways that transform the self. Here is a brief summary of each and some practical suggestions for implementing them into our lives. Here we take the leap into practice.

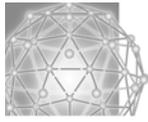
We get into a playful state by having a good romp in whatever form, as often as possible. The more physically engaging the play, the better, since physical shifts can have the most immediate impact on our state.

Every quadrant comes into play. Bringing play into every quadrant makes the experience of each enjoyable and so encourages engagement. An example of a day incorporating all-quadrant play might start with meditation and some ecstatic dance (Upper Left). We might invent a new kind of smoothie for breakfast and then wander off the beaten track (Upper Right) on our way to an opening for an art auction where we meet friends, admire the local talent (Lower Left), and help raise money for a political candidate committed to liberating the play of the world (Lower Right). Integral Transformative Play is the practice of bringing play into every area of life and expanding our lives to include active playful engagement with all quadrants.⁶⁹

We can also bring play into every area of life by learning to *frame all experiences as play*. This might sound ambitious, but if a Husky can turn a predator into a playmate, then with an irresistible enough invitation anything can be included in the play. To do this, the tool of “yes, and...” is invaluable. Of course, it helps to already be in a playful state, but even if we are not, we can turn toward our resistance, welcoming and inhabiting it fully, sensing it in the body as sensations, in the psyche as emotions, and in the mind as thoughts and stories. Most blocks will eventually dissolve within the light and acceptance of awareness.

As the block becomes an object of awareness, you can add the “and...” by playing with it, exaggerating it, talking to it, making it into a movement, a picture, a character, or a sound. You can let it get bigger and more absurd until it is barely recognizable. Then shake it off. If it does not move, it may need to be held and attended to without any agenda or intention to change it. You can also welcome the resistance and respectfully explore what it wants and needs. Approaches have proliferated in the past few decades, so there are many options. Different approaches work for different people, but what is essential is to witness the block as an object, hold it lightly with compassion, and play with it until it relaxes into the field of play.

We can also become sensitive to the myriad ways in which *the world is constantly inviting us to play*. Every moment we are being beckoned into passionate, playful engagement through the exuberant displays of play all around us. All the sounds, smells, tastes, textures, shapes, and movement of life are a deep and persistent play bow waiting for us to notice and respond.



Sometimes these invitations come gift wrapped as synchronicities, the cosmic playmate that gently calls attention to itself as it crosses the boundaries between subject and object, self and world. According to Carl Jung, these events exist in the service of individuation.⁷⁰ Sometimes, like dreams, they reveal an aspect of the unconscious, inviting more of us into conscious play. At other times, they seem more like winks from some transcendent cosmic playmate reminding us that we are neither playing alone nor only for ourselves.

The playmate may also show up as a trickster. Playing in the shadows, a trickster's job is to disrupt our best-laid plans in order to revive and reinvigorate the play. When an uninvited dinner guest shows up or the car has a flat tire, the trickster is insisting that we pay attention, let go of control, and play—or suffer resisting. Both the play of synchronicities and the play of the trickster invite us back onto the playground where all of life and our own transformation take place.

Summary

Through a deeper understanding and an exploration of Integral Play, we discover the dimensions of the playground, while through an adult developmental model, we discover the forms of play that express different stages of consciousness and that contribute to their transformation. By understanding the transformative dynamics of play, we gain insight into the ways we can participate in our own evolution. A developmental grasp of play lets us become more conscious in playing with consciousness. As a species, we now face the challenge of evolving from finite to infinite players so that our presence increases the possibilities for future play. By mapping Integral Play on a developmental model, we hope to provide the basis for further research on the transformative potential of play in adults.

NOTES

¹ Swimme, *The universe is a green dragon: A cosmic creation story*, 1984, p. 119

² See Spariosu, *Dionysus reborn: Play and the aesthetic dimension in modern philosophical and scientific discourse*, 1989, for a discussion of the agonistic power play between the rational and prerational concept of play in the history of philosophy and science.

³ Cited in Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997, p. 2.

⁴ See Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997, for details on the worldviews behind each play theory.

⁵ See Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*, 1955 and Anchor, "History and play: Johan Huizinga and his critics," 1978

⁶ Handelman, "Passages to play: Paradox and process," 1992, p. 12

⁷ The prerational play concept was articulated initially in Pre-Hellenic Greece and revived by philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The rational play concept was articulated first by Plato, then later taken up by Kant, Schiller, Spencer, Groos, and Bateson. It is the predominant view.

⁸ Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997, p. 221

⁹ Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997, p. 222

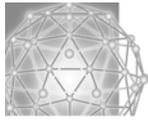
¹⁰ Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997, p. 223

¹¹ Millar, *The psychology of play*, 1968, p. 21

¹² Millar, *The psychology of play*, 1968, p. 21

¹³ Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*, 1972; Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature*, 1999

¹⁴ Barnett, "The adaptive powers of being playful," 1998; Fein & Kinney, "He's a nice alligator: Observations on the affective organization of pretense," 1994; Singer, "Imagination, play and television," 1999; Lieberman, "Playfulness



and divergent thinking: An investigation of their relationship at the Kindergarten level,” 1965; “Playfulness: An attempt to conceptualize a quality of play and of the player,” 1966

¹⁵ The theater improvisation expert, Sue Walden, teaches that the fundamental elements of play are presence, openness, and flexibility.

¹⁶ Spolin, *Improvisation for the theater*, 1963, p. 11

¹⁷ Hans, *The play of the world*, 1981

¹⁸ See Gadamer, “Play as the clue to ontological explanation,” 1998

¹⁹ Koestler, *The act of creation*, 1964

²⁰ Plato, *The Laws*, n.d.

²¹ Koestler, *The act of creation*, 1964

²² *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (3rd ed.), 1992

²³ Winnicott, *Playing and reality*, 1971

²⁴ We use “Integral” synonymously with an AQAL approach and “integral” in the more general sense of “comprehensive” and “inclusive.”

²⁵ For a complete listing of Wilber’s works, see Reynolds, *Embracing reality: The integral vision of Ken Wilber; A historical survey and chapter-by-chapter guide to Wilber’s work*, 2004.

²⁶ Integral Theory has been applied to a plethora of fields including: Environmental philosophy (Zimmerman, “Ken Wilber’s critique of ecological spirituality,” 2001); Education (Fisher, “Lighting up” the integral: A critical review of Ken Wilber’s philosophy and theories related to education, 2003, and Lauzon, “Adult education and the human journey: An evolutionary perspective,” 1998); Medicine (Astin & Astin, “An integral approach to medicine,” 2002); Psychology (Mikulas, *The integrative helper: Convergence of eastern and western traditions*, 2001); Business (Paulson, *Competitive business, caring business: An integral business perspective for the 21st century*, 2002); Future Studies (Slaughter, “Ken Wilber’s path to transformational futures,” 1997); Intersubjectivity (Hargens, “Intersubjective musings: A response to Christian de Quincey’s ‘The promise of integralism,’” 2001); Social Action (Walsh, “Terrorism and other global threats: An integral analysis,” 2002); Criminology (Gibbs, Giever & Pober, “Criminology and the eye of the spirit: An introduction and application of the thoughts of Ken Wilber,” 2000); Music Therapy (Bonde, “Steps toward a meta-theory of music therapy: An introduction to Ken Wilber’s integral psychology and a discussion of its relevance for music therapy,” 2001); Politics (Roof, “Integral approaches that transform us and the world,” 2003, and Wilpert, “Integral politics: A spiritual third way,” 2001); Art (Grey, *The mission of art*, 1998); Near-Death experiences (Paulson, “The near-death experience: An integration of cultural, spiritual, and physical perspectives,” 1999); Christianity (Main, *The way of unknowing*, 1989); Religion (Araya, “Integral religion: Uniting eros and logos,” 2003); and Sustainable Development (Hargens, “Integral development: Taking the middle path towards gross national happiness,” 2002). As evidenced by these examples, Integral Theory has a wide range of applicability across divergent fields of inquiry. For additional examples, consult *AQAL: Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*.

²⁷ Levels can be used in two distinct ways: as a general level of altitude or as a specific level of development associated with a particular line or capacity. In this article, unless otherwise noted, we will be using level to refer to levels within lines.

²⁸ For the purposes of the following examples, we focus on levels, lines, states, and types that are related to the Upper-Left quadrant of experience. Examples could be provided for the other quadrants as well.

²⁹ Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, “An exploratory model of play,” 1990

³⁰ Caillois, *Man, play and games*, 1958/1961, p. 19

³¹ Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997

³² See Gebser, *The ever-present origin*, 1949/1985 for a detailed exploration of historical cultural worldviews.

³³ While both Caillois’ and Sutton-Smith’s categories can be understood from multiple quadrants, our placement is meant to highlight some of the more salient features of each category.

³⁴ Piaget, *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*, 1951

³⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and reality*, 1971; Sutton-Smith, *The ambiguity of play*, 1997

³⁶ For research on stages of development beyond formal operations, see Commons, Sinott, Richards & Armon, *Adult development* (vols. 1-2), 1989, and Alexander & Langer, *Higher stages of human development: Perspectives on adult growth*, 1990.

³⁷ We recognize that there are many terms available to describe this progression.



³⁸ For a detailed exploration of the non-linear qualities of this development, see Wilber, *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*, 1995; *The eye of spirit: An integral vision for a world gone slightly mad*, 1997; and *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*, 2000.

³⁹ See Cook-Greuter, "Postautonomous ego development: A study of its nature and measurement," 1999; Miller & Cook-Greuter, *Transcendence and mature thought in adulthood: The further reaches of adult development*, 1994, and *Creativity, spirituality, and transcendence: Paths to integrity and wisdom in the mature self*, 2000; and Torbert, *The power of balance: Transforming self, society, and scientific inquiry*, 1991, and *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*, 2004. Cook-Greuter and Torbert's research is based in large part on Jane Loevinger's 1998 Sentence Completion test, which has had over 10,000 tests performed, and their Leadership Development Profile, which has had over 6,000 tests performed. See Loevinger, *Technical foundations for measuring ego development: The Washington University sentence completion test*, 1998.

⁴⁰ See Beck & Cowan, *Spiral dynamics: Mastering values, leadership and change*, 1996. Correlates are as follows (the first term is a label we have generated, the second label is its SD correlate, and the third term is the correlate in Torbert's model): Magical Play (Purple/Impulsive), Aggressive Play (Red/Opportunist), Ordered Play (Blue/Diplomat), Status Play (Orange/Expert & Achiever), Sensitive Play (Green/Individualist), Dynamic Play (Yellow/Strategist), Integral/Complex Play (Turquoise/Magician), and Mystical Play (Coral/Ironist). Due to its minimal expression in the play literature, the Beige vMeme of SD or the Symbiotic level of Cook-Greuter is not represented in this presentation. Also, note that Cook-Greuter and Torbert's two stages of Expert and Achiever are presented here as one stage: Status Play.

⁴¹ For a succinct and accessible article that provides a lot of detail for each self, see Cook-Greuter, "A detailed description of the development of nine action logics: Adapted from ego development theory for the leadership development framework," 2002.

⁴² See Wade, *Transcendent sex: When lovemaking opens the veil, 2004 for research on the transpersonal dimensions of sexual encounters*. She is also a developmental psychologist.

⁴³ Cook-Greuter, "A detailed description of the development of nine action logics: Adapted from ego development theory for the leadership development framework," 2002

⁴⁴ Seed, Macy, Fleming & Naess, *Thinking like a mountain: Towards a council of all being*, 1988 and Macy & Brown, *Coming back to life: Practices to reconnect our lives, our world*, 1998 are excellent examples of work that exercises the moral imagination and opens the self to new realms of identification.

⁴⁵ The Integral model recognizes that research to date suggests that some lines lead other lines in development: cognitive development is necessary but not sufficient for interpersonal development, which is necessary but not sufficient for moral development.

⁴⁶ Torbert, *Learning to exercise timely action now: In leading, loving, inquiring, and retiring*, 2002

⁴⁷ Quote attributed to H. G. Wells, n.d.

⁴⁸ Koestler, *The act of creation*, 1964

⁴⁹ See http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jul2005/di20050719_605773.htm?campaign_id=search

⁵⁰ Glenn & Knapp, "The interactive framing of play in adult conversations," 1987

⁵¹ Kegan, *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*, 1998; Kegan & Lahey, *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*, 2001

⁵² Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*, 1972; Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature*, 1999

⁵³ Koestler, *The act of creation*, 1964; Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of intertextuality in folklore and literature*, 1978

⁵⁴ Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*, 1972

⁵⁵ Sutton-Smith, "Play as parody of emotional vulnerability," 2003

⁵⁶ Nisargadatta, *I am that*, 1973

⁵⁷ Sutton-Smith, "Play as parody of emotional vulnerability," 2003, p. 4

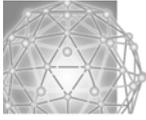
⁵⁸ Sutton-Smith, "Play as parody of emotional vulnerability," 2003, p. 231

⁵⁹ Bergler, *The psychology of gambling*, 1957

⁶⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and reality*, 1971

⁶¹ Erikson, *Toys and reasons: Stages in the ritualization of experience*, 1963, p. 17

⁶² Provine, *Laughter: A scientific investigation*, 2001



⁶³ Brown, "Animals at play," 1994

⁶⁴ Spolin, *Improvisation for the theater*, 1999, p. 5

⁶⁵ See Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the theater*, 1981

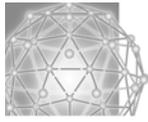
⁶⁶ Almaas, *Space cruiser inquiry: True guidance for the inner journey*, 2002

⁶⁷ Seed, Macy, Fleming & Naess, *Thinking like a mountain: Towards a council of all beings*, 1988

⁶⁸ Macy & Brown, *Coming back to life: Practices to reconnect our lives, our world*, 1998

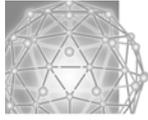
⁶⁹ See Leonard & Murphy, *The life we are given: A long-term program for realizing the potential of body, mind, heart, and soul*, 1995 for a description of Integral Transformative Practice.

⁷⁰ Jung, *Memories, dreams, reflections*, 1961/1989

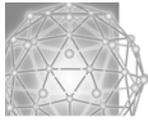


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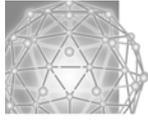
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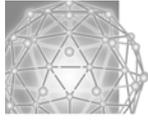
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