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Pretend play: a productive illusion

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Abstract

The contribution focuses on pretend play, a kind of play that is found in children of all cultures and is easily recognizable by adults. The expression with which this type of play is labelled presents, in the common sense, a semantic aura that refers to a series of terms with a negative meaning such as falsehood, deception, error, illusion. Starting from the assumption that the understanding of the meaning of pretend play must be based on a distancing from the idea of truth as a reflection of reality, I'll present and discuss some play theories which show, on the contrary, the necessity and the productivity of the "as if." In line with this perspective, infantile pretend play will be considered as the prototype of an essential human experience to which particular attention should be paid, to be promoted with sensitivity and delicacy, and not to be used improperly as an instructional tool.

Keywords Play Pretence Imagination Divergent Thinking Inlusio

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The phenomenon play

The basis from which I will elaborate my reflections on the theme is constituted by the traits which, according to Caillois,[1] distinguish play. These consist in a series of peculiar characteristics, connected, more than to the activity itself, to the attitude of the player while playing: freedom (controlled play is no longer play and loses its nature of attractive and joyful fun); separateness (from ordinary life, from what we call "real" or serious, circumscribed within spatially-temporally defined boundaries: the chessboard, the football field, etc.); uncertainty (the development is not predetermined and the outcome is not obvious, so there is an element of risk always present in play which makes it attractive); unproductivity (play is an unfinalized activity: it is played only for the pleasure of playing, not for purposes external to it); regulation (play is not an anarchic activity; it creates a universe in which rules different from those in force in the ordinary world are established); fictitious statute (accompanied by the specific awareness of a different reality or of total unreality with respect to normal life).

It would be these properties that make play attractive, engaging and enjoyable – "an oasis of happiness," as Fink defined it[2] in which the fullness of existence is realized. At the same time, alongside the affective colouring of playful activity, the aforementioned properties make it the place of *sui generis* thought, of experimentation without consequences, where everything is possible.

However, such an enhancement should not be taken for granted. An aura of negativity has historically characterized discussion of play as a waste of time, lack of seriousness, infantilism, unproductiveness, dissipation, with a particular emphasis starting from the Protestant work ethic.

1 R. Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).
2 E. Fink, *Oase des Glücks. Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiberg-München: K. Alber, 1957).

But even when play is positively evaluated – and this is the case in current pedagogical debate on childhood – there is a risk that its educational effectiveness is considered more in terms of an "exploitation" for extrinsic purposes (of learning, of moral education, etc.) than the recognition of its peculiar properties, the primary of which is de-finalization. This is because the way in which play is viewed seems to take shape from conceptual contrasts that relegate it to a position of subordination: falsity vs truth; fantasy vs reality; gratuity vs productivity; frivolity vs seriousness.

The particular case of pretend play

Then there is a particular type of play with respect to which these contrasts are even more evident, giving rise, in pedagogical discussion, to proclamations of enthusiasm, on the one hand, as if it were the panacea of education, or of strong perplexity on the other, as a harbinger of possible evil consequences. This is pretend play,[3] a type of play that is found in children of all cultures, the first manifestations of which occur at around a year and a half and become increasingly articulated and complex in the following years.

What are the characteristics of this type of play according to psycho-pedagogical research? Greta Fein, an American scholar who has carried out numerous observational studies of children engaged in "pretending," and has discussed them in the light of the most significant theoretical reflections, identifies five aspects that characterize this type of play.[4] The first – referential freedom – refers to the divergent relationship that the child has with the surrounding environment, producing playful transformations,

3 In psycho-pedagogical literature on childhood, the terms pretend play, make-believe play, symbolic play, imaginative play, "as if" play are used interchangeably.
4 G. Fein, "Pretend play: creativity and consciousness," in D. Gorlitz, J.F. Wohlwill, eds., *Curiosity, Imagination and Play* (Hillsdale - New Jersey - London: Erlbaum, 1987): 281-304.

for example the arm of an armchair becomes the saddle of a motorbike. The second – denotative license – concerns the divergent position adopted by the child towards real experience as a result of which the events represented are more inventions than reports of facts that occurred in reality. The third – affective relations – indicates that what is represented in fictional play are emotions, affections, experiences, relationships: the actions performed during play take on meaning if they are considered in this perspective. The fourth – sequential uncertainty – informs us that in fiction the plots have a recursive and non-linear quality: in play new themes emerge, old themes are taken up again; the succession is not predictable. Finally, the fifth – self-mirroring – has two different aspects: it indicates on the one hand that the child is aware of "pretending" and, on the other hand, that in play he expresses himself, his particular point of view on the world. It is because of these characteristics that in pretend play one object is used as if it were another, a person behaves as if he were another; the present time and place (the here and the now) become a different time and an elsewhere; you can talk to imaginary figures and people (pretend to be chased by the big bad wolf or to be talking on the phone with grandmother) and materialize non-existent objects (such as when you sip coffee from an empty cup or light an imaginary fire on the toy stove).

Play and mimesis: against an epistemology of the copy

The detection of these characteristics denies the idea of common sense, rather widespread, according to which "pretending" is an imitative form of play. (By playing pretend, the children would reproduce, for example, the behaviour of the mother who looks after her children

or the doctor who visited them or the plumber who came to the house to repair the washing machine.) What should instead be highlighted is that, while taking a cue from what surrounds them and using concrete objects, children distort reality and perform actions that differ from those seen and known.

This aspect is particularly highlighted by the sociologist of education William Corsaro, who, considering pretend play as a significant aspect of what he calls "peer culture" or "children's culture," speaks of "interpretive reproduction"[5] according to which children do not limit themselves to imitating and internalizing the surrounding reality but strive to interpret and make sense of their culture and to participate in it. Children critically reproduce ideas that come from the world of adults and they appropriate them creatively and collectively until they become characteristic aspects of their culture. Peer culture is an inter-subjective process of co-construction of meanings.

Freud, in the essay *The Relation of the poet to day-dreaming* (1908),[6] in which child's play is compared to the artistic activity of a novelist, affirms that when he plays, the child suspends his relationship with reality and gives a new order to the things of his world. In play, children collect elements of the external world and use them to serve some element that derives from internal reality, without hallucinating: children know that it is play.

In this regard, it is interesting to mention the critical exchange between two important scholars of play, Jean Piaget and Brian Sutton-Smith.[7] According to Piaget, intellectual development proceeds through two processes,

5 W.A. Corsaro, "Interpretive reproduction in children's peer cultures," *Social Psychology Quarters* 55, no. 2 (1992): 160-177, https://doi.org/10.2307/2786944.
6 S. Freud, "The relation of the poet to daydreaming" (1908), trans. J. Riviere, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. IX (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1976): 173-183.
7 B. Sutton-Smith, "Piaget on play: a critique" (1966), in E.R. Herron, B. Sutton-Smith, eds., *Child's Play* (Malabar, Florida: R.E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1971): 104-110.

that of "assimilation" and that of "accommodation." There is assimilation when an individual uses something of his environment (eg. an object) for an activity that is already part of his repertoire and that is not modified: an already existing scheme is used when dealing with a new object or new situation (for example, if a young child has mastered the action of grasping and throwing he will apply these actions to new objects he comes across). It is therefore something known/acquired that is simply applied. On the contrary, accommodation occurs when the old responses (what has been acquired) are not effective to deal with the environment and need to be modified (e.g. the child realizes that he has difficulty in throwing an object heavier than usual and modifies his grip and hand-eye coordination so as to launch it effectively). With assimilation, something already possessed is simply exercised; accommodation, on the other hand, involves the recognition of something new. According to Piaget, only the latter – accommodation – can be recognized as learning while play would be assimilation in its purest form, an expression of subjectivity without value for the knowledge of reality. Hence Sutton-Smith's critical observation that the conception of knowledge underlying Piaget's theory of development is a "copyist epistemology," a naive epistemology according to which accommodation is a sort of photographic negative of external reality.[8] In confirmation of this, Sutton-Smith notes in Piaget's conception an asymmetry in the functions performed, in the development of thought, by imitation and play, in favour of the former. An asymmetry confirmed by the fact that Piaget believes that play, especially symbolic play, disappears with the progressive conquest of logical and rational forms of thought: the more play loses its character of "distortion of reality" the more it transforms into objective imitation. But

8 J. Piaget, *La formation du Symbole chez l'Enfant* (Neuchâtel: Editions Delachaux & Niestle, 1945).

the most stringent criticism concerns the focus of Piaget's theory of development on cognitive operations of a rational and convergent type to the detriment of imaginative and divergent ones. It would be precisely this centering that would make Piaget consider the symbolic thought typical of play as a strictly infantile mode of little use for the adult mind.

Possible worlds

The remarks made by Sutton-Smith are based on references other than those that form the background to Piaget's theory of development; they are based on the criticism of the idea of knowledge as a copy which from Plato onward, passing through Aristotle, has long permeated Western culture, on the recognition of divergent thought as an important intellectual tool and on the enhancement of the imagination as a typically human way of relating to the world. In play there is a gap, a divergence from what we consider real as objective; however, the reality to which play gives rise is not pure illusion, lie, the expression of a self-centred subjectivity but the result of the creation of possible worlds. This creation presents two sides at the same time, one relating to the form of thought to which play, and in particular pretend play, gives rise; the other relates to the emotional-affective dimension which the power to modify and create urges.

Taking up the Aristotelian distinction between *episteme* and *techne*, Silvana Borutti, in her *Filosofia delle scienze umane*, writes:

> True knowledge for Aristotle has to do with what cannot be other than what it is (*episteme*). *Techne* (art) has to do with what can be differently, with the modality of being that is typical [...] of the poietic world (poieo: fabricate, build, work) of creation: it has to do

therefore with the future and with the possible, whose principle is in those who create.[9]

With the latter, therefore, we go "beyond the datum" and push ourselves towards the possible. It is in this perspective that fiction takes on a particular meaning.

Fiction [...] should not refer so much to the semantic element of 'pretending' in the sense of 'simulating', and therefore to the dimension of a lie, of the illusion of truth, of the true–like, but rather to the semantic field of 'pretending' like modelling, forming, building.[10]

Fiction, in the sense in which we intend it here, "loses all mimetic status, and rather has the status that we have called 'poietic': productive of reference worlds."[11]

This configurative tendency producing possible worlds is found in an embryonic form, as mentioned at the beginning, in pretend play, in which real and lived experience is represented in non-mimetic ways. Children:

When they 'pretend', they interpret, comment, exaggerate, highlight rather than imitate. Reality and experience can be represented, staged, and, above all, modified. [...] Thus the child can represent not so much what has happened to him but the sense of what has happened to him.[12]

Two sisters "play sisters"

This aspect of the extraction of meaning, which is typical of symbolic play, emerges with particular force

9 S. Borutti, *Filosofia delle scienze umane* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1999): 100. This and other excerpts cited from texts published in Italy have been translated into English by the author of this essay.
10 Ibid.: 107.
11 Ibid.: 112.
12 A. Bondioli, D. Savio, *Osservare il gioco di finzione. Una scala di valutazione delle abilità ludico-simboliche infantili* (SVALSI) (Bergamo: Edizioni Junior, 1994): 11.

from the essay “Play and its role in the mental development of the child”, in which Vygotsky reports an example of play that is only apparently mimetic, that of two sisters “playing sisters.”[13] Why should two sisters reproduce in play what they do every day? According to Vygotsky, the two sisters are exploring what it means to “be sisters,” they are trying to discover the meaning of sisterhood through a non-mimetic but modelling activity, which allows, in the execution, a multiplicity of variations (the sisters in the park games, sisters at breakfast, sisters at a party, sisters in the dark at night, etc.).

The paradox of play: the word cat doesn’t scratch

In a nursery school class we have witnessed this dialogue:

Claudia (41 months) starts playing by asking: “Where is dad? Where is dad?”

Laura (38 months), pointing to Emanuele (32 months): “Dad is here, look!”

Claudia: “No! ... daddy ... the pretend one.”

Laura: “He is the pretend one” and puts Emanuele in front of her.

Claudia to Emanuele: “Are you pretend?”

Emanuele nods his head.

To try to understand the meaning of this playful conversation, we can refer to the thinking of Bateson, who considers play a form of meta-communication about the world. For Bateson,[14] play has a metaphorical meaning but

13 L.S. Vygotsky, “Play and its role in the mental development of the child” (1966), trans. N. Varesov, M. Barrs, in J.S. Bruner, A. Jolly, K. Sylva, eds., *Play. Its Role in Development and Evolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books): 537-554.

14 G. Bateson, “A theory of play and fantasy” (1954), in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1954): 216-235.

with a particular emphasis. In play we operate a shift: objects, actions and events are transferred from the context that has as its frame "this is the real world" to the context that has as its frame "this is play," but the two contexts are not completely separate. The players are "on the border" between the real world and the play world. Play isn't real – it's "pretend" – but it's not false. If it were, that is, if it completely lost the link with the meanings that objects, actions and events represented in play denote in the "real" context, it would lose its meaning. He also says that, precisely for this reason, play allows us to put together things that do not belong to the same category, opening up to "logically" improper references that undermine the usual way of considering things. "The sun is a ball of fire," says a child watching a sunset; in a game observed in a nursery school, a cardboard box on which the eyes of a group of children are focused is the computer of a police operations centre. "Play is a disassembly: we can only play when we manage to 'do violence' to our categories,"[15] which makes change and new arrangements possible.

The metaphor is a good example of the confusion of logical types that allows us to experience change.

The metaphor as a re-description of the world

In playful fiction there is always an aspect of "non-literality" and variation that makes it related to the metaphor, seen not as a lexical substitution, based on the similarity between things or ideas (substitutive and comparative conception), but as an interactive structure:

15 R. Rovatti, "Il gioco in questione," in M. Noziglia, ed., *Giocare e pensare* (Milano: Guerini, 1995): 95-106. See also D. Zoletto, "Giocare per disimparare," *Multiverso*, no. 2, http://www.multiversoweb.it/rivista/n-02-flessibilita/giocare-per-disimparare-209/, accessed December 9, 2021.

in a metaphor meet and conflict [...] heterogeneous paths of meaning, which determine each other, reorganizing our way of seeing.[16]

This is the function that Wittgenstein attributes to the metaphor as "seeing as."[17] If we then consider pretend play as a metaphorical device, a non-literal transcription-translation of situations, experiences, behaviours, its enlightenment function clearly emerges. Again quoting Borutti, metaphorical thought produces a semantic increase,

that is, it says something that can only be said through the metaphorical turn (it is not related to a literal level) but is a re-description of objects, their reconfiguration.[18]

Narrative thinking, with all its various implications, is the medium and the fruit of the metaphorical reconfiguration of experience.

Illusion and creative experience

Winnicott some time ago affirmed that when playing, our judgment of reality is suspended, that in play the distinction between what is produced by me (subjectivity) and what comes from outside (the not-me) falls away.[19] Play brings to life external reality – the transitional objects: the flap of the blanket, the teddy bear, the doll are not lifeless objects but are alive – and makes these new objects open to sharing only if one believes in the power of illusion.

Here is a counterexample, taken from Tolstoy's *Childhood*, which helps us to understand what it means to play with a spoilsport who does not agree to place himself in the intermediate zone between subjective and objective:

16 S. Borutti, *Filosofia delle scienze umane*: 117.
17 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953): 278.
18 S. Borutti, *Filosofia delle scienze umane*: 120.
19 D. Winnicott, *Play and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971).

Woloda's condescension did not please us much. On the contrary, his lazy, tired expression took away all the fun of play. When we sat on the ground and imagined that we were sitting in a boat and either fishing or rowing with all our might, Woloda persisted in sitting with folded hands or in anything but a fisherman's posture. I made a remark about it, but he replied that, whether we moved our hands or not, we should neither gain nor lose ground — certainly not advance at all, and I was forced to agree with him. Again, when I pretended to go out hunting, and, with a stick over my shoulder, set off into the wood, Woloda only lay down on his back with his hands under his head, and said that he supposed it was all the same whether he went or not. Such behaviour and speeches cooled our ardour for the game and were very disagreeable — the more so since it was impossible not to confess to oneself that Woloda was right, I myself knew that it was not only impossible to kill birds with a stick, but to shoot at all with such a weapon. Still, it was play, and if we were once to begin reasoning thus, it would become equally impossible for us to go for drives on chairs. I think that even Woloda himself cannot at that moment have forgotten how, in the long winter evenings, we had been used to cover an arm-chair with a shawl and make a carriage of it — one of us being the coachman, another one the footman, the two girls the passengers, and three other chairs the trio of horses abreast. With what ceremony we used to set out, and with what adventures we used to meet on the way! How gaily and quickly those long winter evenings used to pass! If we were always to judge from reality, play would be nonsense; but if play was nonsense, what else would there be left to do?[20]

The involvement of each player lies in participating in the illusion that comes from keeping uncertainty alive (is it my creation or is it a "not me?" Is this a world only I see or do others too?). It is interesting to note how

20 L. Tolstoy, *Childhood* (1852), trans. C.J. Hogarth, chapter 8, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2142/2142-h/2142-h.htm#link2H_4_0008, accessed January 12, 2023.

Winnicott, grafts, on this idea of play as an intermediate area of experience, the theme of culture as the fruition/production of shared play, as an inter-subjective dialogue that can only take place in that third dimension of experience where subjective and objective meet. Culture is not seen here as a set of meanings crystallized and codified to be transmitted or acquired, but as an experiential practice of meaning-making, of creation, re-combination, reinterpretation of meanings.

Fiction as conjecture

In line with these considerations Susan Isaacs, English psychoanalyst and educationalist, follower of Dewey, in one of her most significant works, *Intellectual growth in young children*, considers that "imaginative play, in its most intense expression may be looked upon as the prototype of the 'thought experiment'," [21] a close relative of hypothetical reasoning. "As if" play offers the possibility of emancipating oneself from the present state of things, creating an imaginary world governed by the formula of "if ... then." As recounted in the documents reported in this work, one cannot get off the imaginary ship because one would drown; castles cannot be built "up to the sky" because planes would knock them down.

Pretending, therefore, is an aid to non-reproductive but modelling thought which is at the basis of the abductive capacity of elaborating theories starting from experience; furthermore, it would approach that aspect of scientific elaboration relating to the production of hypotheses to be verified.

21 S. Isaacs, *The Intellectual Growth of Young Children* (London: Routledge, 1930): 104.

Believe in illusion

There is a strong emotional-affective component in pretend play that should not be forgotten.

Michael and Enid Balint, Hungarian psychoanalysts and a married couple, describe the emotions felt in the game of catch: the fear of being caught and the hope of escaping capture; the possibility of always starting over.[22] The liminal condition of play, the fact of its being on the border between reality and illusion, produces real emotions in fictitious contexts, which makes play attractive, engaging and safe. Just think of the spool game of little Ernst, Freud's nephew,[23] who, in his throwing away a reel-and-thread, represents the painful removal of his mother and, at the same time, revenge against her; bringing it closer, the consolation of the reunion with her. But also another game commonly played between mother and child – peek-a-boo – has a similar emotional meaning: the negative emotions aroused by the disappearance, albeit momentary, of the protective and loved figure, find their positive reversal and reassurance in the reappearance of the maternal face. This is what happens in fairy tales: the happy ending after the hero's vicissitudes and risky adventures offers satisfaction.

To conclude: some educational considerations

The first. Play may/should in no way be manipulated. It must not be bent to serve extrinsic purposes (e.g. learning by playing), nor be sanctioned/punished in its manifestations as long as it remains within the realm of fiction (for example cooking a doll); it must not be devalued as unrealistic

22 M. Balint, E. Balint, *Thrills and Regression* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1959).
23 S. Freud, "Beyond the pleasure principle" (1920), trans., J. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. XVIII* (New York: W W Norton & Co, 1976): 1-64.

and unproductive (Stop playing, do your homework!); it should not be interrupted (so it's just play/just a game).

"As if" play manifests the value of childhood in its fullness and shows that it unfolds all its power only if it is kept on the razor's edge between "believing" and "not believing," between the "true" and the "possible," between the "real" and the "imaginary."

The second consideration is closely related to the first. Play can be shared between children and between adults and children only if, together, you cross the uncertain boundary between reality and illusion and, together, you enjoy the adventures of the imagination, if you are able to match/overlap your own intermediate areas of experience such as when, in a cloud, the same subject is glimpsed (a horse, a dolphin, a car). Sharing play involves getting in tune with one another within this dimension as adventurous as it is rewarding.

Finally, the interpretation that has been given up to now of pretend play places this childlike conduct, of creating possible worlds, at the root of both art and science, united by being both reconfiguring activities. Children are neither artists nor scientists but it is possible – and necessary – to support and foster their predisposition to play as well as to focus on expressive forms of value and significant aesthetic fruition, both to support a hypothetical thought that allows forms of reflective investigation.[24] It is in this sense that we can speak of play, and, in particular, of pretend play as a productive illusion to be nurtured with delicacy and respect. The imagination must be educated, as Frey states,[25] but not domesticated.

24 A. Bondioli, "Impulso epistemofilico e gioco: alle radici di scienza e arte," in E. Mignosi, G. Nuti, eds., *Un'infanzia fatta di scienza e di arte* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2020): 15-36.
25 N. Frey, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington/Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1964): xx.

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