

fun

Fun is play's *raison d'être*: Play needs no reason outside itself. Individuals play "for the fun of it." Fun comes as an adrenaline rush, a feeling of euphoria mild to wild.

Fun increases or decreases in response to the sequence of acts in a conversation and the building of a shared world.

a model of play

We play to have fun. We play to develop relationships, learn new things, and know ourselves better. Play can be cooperative, competitive, even selfish. It occurs in a variety of times and places, beginning when we are children and continuing throughout our lives. Play is an activity through which we exercise and develop our creativity; it is a source of innovation and new ways to solve problems.

Yet when we try to define play, we face the challenge of articulating something that has come naturally to us our whole lives. Simple questions puzzle us: What is play? What does it comprise? How does it begin and end? What makes good play? Can there ever be bad play?

This poster proposes a model of play, defined as a conversation between individuals that creates a shared world in their imaginations and leads to fun. The model takes the form of a concept map: a web of terms that relate to, and together explain, a single concept. Terms form the nodes of the map, and propositions link and define the relationships between nodes.

In play the overarching goal is to have fun—and to keep having fun—to continue playing. Play takes place between individuals, where an individual can be a single person, an entire team of people, a particular perspective within one person, or a virtual person.

The conversation begins with an act, and each act advances the conversation. An act can be throwing a ball in a game of catch or serving tea while playing house. An act by one individual is observed and assessed by the other, in preparation for the next act.

As the conversation grows, it builds a shared world in the individuals' imaginations. The shared world requires their engagement and creates meaning for them as they inhabit and develop it. A young boy playing with a toy elephant (with a second perspective in his mind speaking for the elephant) creates meaning by referring to different parts of the room as different parts of the world, as he and his elephant travel together. The significance of the shared world increases as he feels that he and his elephant are becoming better friends.

Eventually engagement wanes, and the conversation ends. The end crystallizes play's benefits and harms, the experience it delivers. Experience guides individuals as they continue to learn and interact with others. Experience affects how they will play in the future—and also their lives outside play.

Play provides space for experiment—opportunity to try new things or even try on new personas. The freedom and exhilaration we feel in play may help us create. Simply playing—fooling around, messing about, tinkering, hacking—invites juxtapositions, provides experience, and reveals new points of view. Who can say where play will lead?

This model of play only begins to address how play affects our lives, our work, and our growth, but perhaps it also begins to point out the importance of—and even the need for—more play in our lives. But enough talk. It's time to play.

imagination

The individuals' imaginations house a shared world and supply referents to it, either by mapping real-world objects to shared-world objects, or by creating entirely new, unrelated objects that do not exist in the real world. For example, children might pretend a couch is a boat they are sailing.

shared world

Play conversations build shared worlds in the imaginations of individuals. Shared worlds contain imagined time, place, actors, actions, and relationships. Developing shared worlds creates meaning for individuals as they together bring different referents to life—and thus bring their shared world to life.

Referents may be objects incorporated into the play world as themselves or symbols standing for imagined objects. Use of symbols in play may establish their meaning likewise. A "meta-conversation" (stepping out of the play conversation) can also establish the meaning of symbols. Symbols, such as game pieces, become tools for remembering, thinking, and acting. Susan Starr terms this sort of symbol a "boundary object." Nicholas Christman points out their value as "common points of reference."

A shared world provides an internal context for play acts. Each play act may extend the scope of the shared world, enabling and even encouraging more play acts, further extending the shared world.

conversation

A conversation is an interaction between two individuals, beginning in shared language, developing into understanding, moving towards agreement, and sometimes leading to transaction.

A game of cat-and-mouse is a conversation. The cat tries to catch the mouse. The mouse tries to get away. When the cat chases, the mouse runs; when the cat stops, the mouse draws near again. Through the conversation, the cat teaches the mouse, and the mouse teaches the cat. Cat-and-mouse is play if an individual's main goal is fun, not dinner.

topic

Play conversations have topics—the subject of play. Topics may be the game played, the environment explored (real or imagined; ad hoc or highly formalized), or even the method of interacting (the performance of certain sequences, the quality of sound or movement). For example, a couple dancing a waltz engages in a conversation, probably with the main goal of fun, and thus play. A mathematician noodling on an equation may also be playing. Most human activities offer the opportunity for play. Individuals may shift topics as play continues.

rules

Play conversations have rules, guidelines that regulate each act and determine which acts are permissible. Play is as unconstrained as individuals allow. Individuals affect rules by their choice of topic or by agreeing to their own rules. Throughout a play conversation, individuals may have "meta-conversations," stepping outside the play conversation to negotiate a rule or question the legality of an act.

goals

In play, one of the primary goals is to have fun—to continue engaging in the conversation that creates fun. Individuals choose the means for achieving that goal; they choose the topic of conversation, for example, which game to play. Within a topic, they choose different strategies and pursue a series of sub-goals, adjusting means according to their effectiveness. Goals and sub-goals and associated means form a tree (or web) of possibilities for action.

When individuals' goals are not met (e.g., they are not having fun), they can try other strategies (other means) or choose to end the play conversation.

The context of play also includes external goals. External goals may impinge on the goals of play. A student may love to skate and play hockey. Goals related to winning—pleasing friends, coaches, parents; receiving a scholarship; going to college; being successful in life—these may overwhelm or supersede the goal of having fun. They may transform play into something else.

assess

Assessment involves comparing observations of what's happening with what's desired—comparing actual state with goal state. Am I moving closer to my goal or farther away? Should this course of action continue or change? Does a specific short-term goal still make sense in the context of broader long-term goals? Am I having fun? Should we change the rules—or the topic?

observe

Individuals observe each other's acts. What is the other individual doing? What might that mean? Is this new act consistent with previous acts? Is it consistent with other information? What was the effect of my act? How has the other individual reacted to my acts? Am I being understood? Do we agree?

act

Conversations are built through a series of acts—speaking or making other sounds; gesturing or moving; hitting, kicking, pushing, or throwing other things. The acts take place simultaneously or in a sequence of turns alternating between individuals.

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individual wants to

Play is a conversation, and conversations require participants—at least two individuals. An individual can be:

- a single person
- a group of people (a team)
- one of many perspectives within a single person
- a virtual person (a perspective within a computer game)

A typical conversation involves two people, but conversation can take other forms as well. Two teams have a conversation as they play; the individual members come together to form a body—they are incorporated into a team. Likewise, a single person may play alone but carry on a conversation in her head—a conversation between herself and an imagined friend. Or a single person may carry on a conversation with a virtual person, as when playing a video game or bouncing a ball against a wall.

play

Play has attracted lots of research, and scholars have identified many types of play.

Roger Callois defined four categories of games: *agón* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation), and *ilinx* (vertigo). In competitions such as sports and debate, individuals play to win. Chance refers to events where players are up against the odds, as in gambling. In simulation, children pretend to be kings and knights, and adults perform religious rituals. Vertigo induces pleasure through physical dizziness, such as spinning or riding roller coasters.

Callois also placed ways of playing on a continuum, ranging from *paidia* (active, tumultuous, exuberant) to *ludus* (calculation, contrivance, subordination to rules). A game of tag exemplifies *paidia*, while chess exemplifies *ludus*.

prerequisites

Before play can begin, individuals must fulfill certain prerequisites. These prerequisites are contextual (e.g., time, place, and freedom), physical (e.g., rest, nutrition, health, and safety), and psychological (e.g., emotional well-being).

context shapes and may fulfill

Play occurs in a context—the physical world in which individuals live and also the social world to which they belong. The physical world may provide resources needed for play. The social world may create opportunities for play. Play is only possible when individuals have a stable relationship with their environment.

The context of play may be informal—neighborhood kids in an empty lot—or formal—Olympic teams in a huge stadium.

prerequisites

experience

Play enriches an individual's experience. Experience influences decisions to participate in future play conversations, as well as the level of fun that play conversations create. Experience also informs the choice of future play topics.

The experience of play can have unexpected consequences, sometimes much later in life. Rear Admiral Grace Murray Hopper, a well-known computer scientist, told of facing a difficult programming problem and solving it after noticing it shared a structure similar to the pattern of passing in a play from her high-school basketball career.

benefit/harm

When play ends, benefits or harms not readily apparent during play may become apparent.

Play enriches the individual's experience by enabling learning, bonding with others, and emotional healing. It can also harm the individual through physical injury, harbored grudge, or lowered self-esteem. Obsession and addiction may also be consequences of play, where individuals cannot stop playing or neglect other activities in favor of play. Such effects beg the question: When is play too much?

end (pause)

The conversation and the shared world it creates eventually come to an end. External conditions, often out of control of the individuals, can end conversations, for example, running out of time, distractions, inclement weather, obligations to take part in other activities (e.g., class, dinner), and injuries. Voluntary exits, such as when an individual is not having enough fun, can end conversations as well.

Conversations can also be paused, allowing individuals a chance to rest or regroup. Some pauses allow conversations about the conversation—"meta-conversations" about the shared world. The clock stops during a football game when referees discuss a foul.

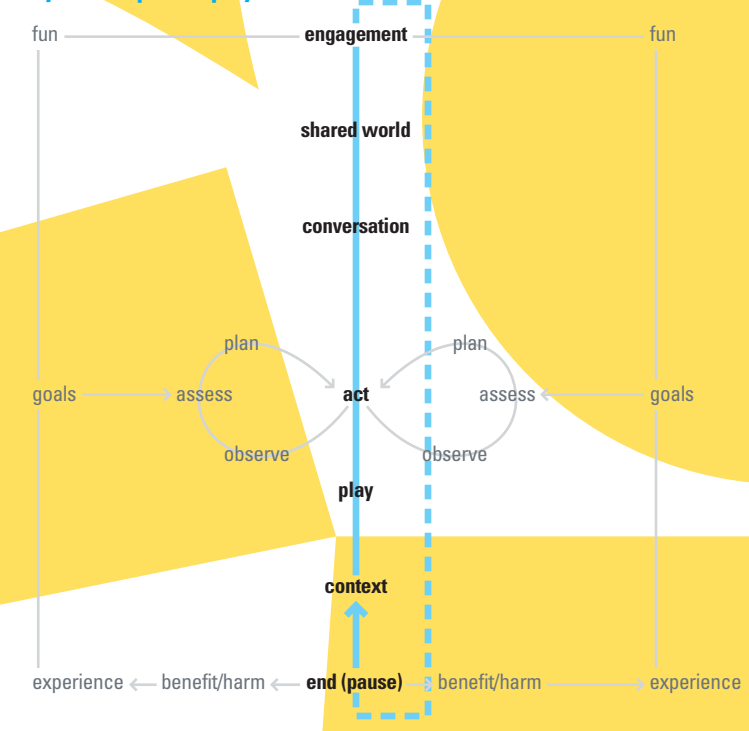
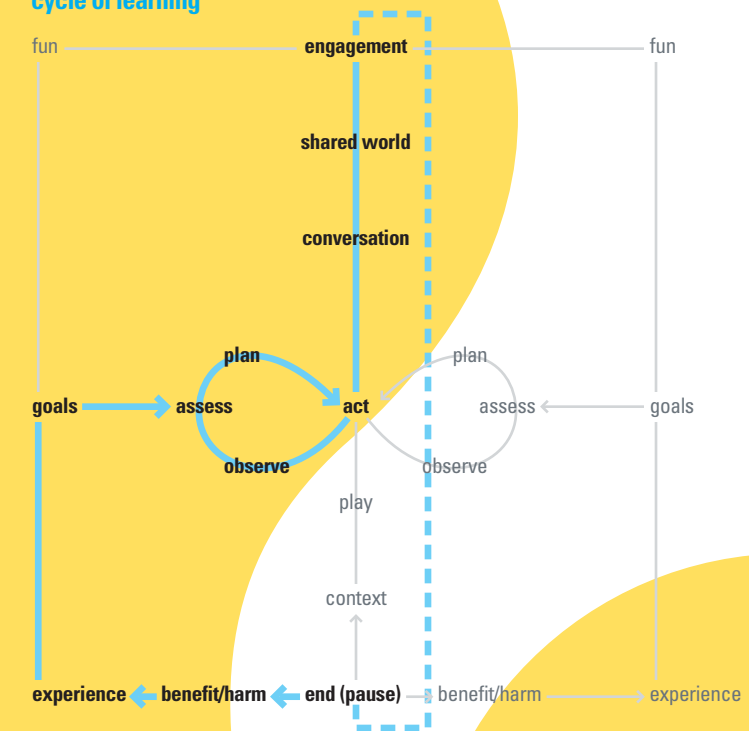
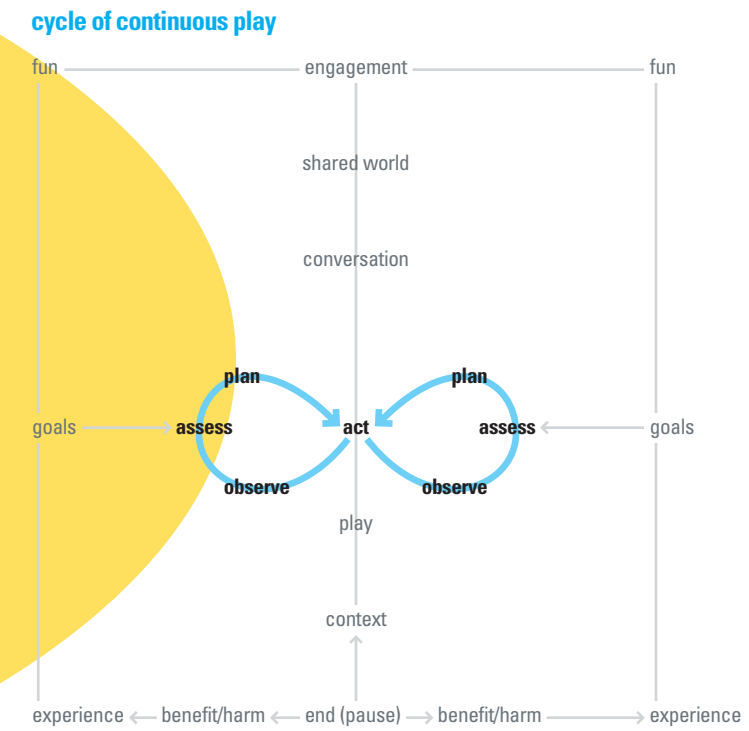
Individuals can easily re-enter play. Ending one conversation creates an opportunity to begin another.

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