
Play as Experience



THOMAS S. HENRICKS

The author investigates what he believes one of the more important aspects of play—the experience it generates in its participants. He considers the quality of this experience in relation to five ways of viewing play—as action, interaction, activity, disposition, and within a context. He treats broadly the different forms of affect, including emotion, then critically reviews several prominent theories of the connection between play and experience. He concludes by emphasizing the need to integrate these approaches for a deeper understanding of how play functions in people’s lives. **Key words:** play as affect; play as action; play as activity; play as disposition; play as experience; play as interaction; play within context

Introduction

Yet in this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening,
lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play.

—JOHANN HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*

MANY STUDENTS OF PLAY, including me, have attempted to describe the qualities that distinguish play from other involvements. Typically, such attempts feature assemblages of definitions and theories about play (Millar 1968; Ellis 1973; Levy 1978; Spariosu 1989; Sutton-Smith 1997; Power 2005; Burghardt 2005; Henricks 2015). The writers of these works offer their own, usually modest, conclusions about play’s general character and implications. Always, they express their fascination with play’s variable and elusive expressions.

I am not trying here, at least not directly, to develop these attempts to summarize play. Instead, I wish to focus on one special aspect of play: the extent to which it generates distinctive patterns of awareness in its participants. I hold

such patterns—which are affective as well as cognitive—to be key ingredients of what it means to play. Much like the scholars offering reviews of play theories, I do not claim that any given experience should be equated with all forms of play or that we can find such an experience only in play and not in other activities. However, I do assert that players commonly begin their activity anticipating a certain kind of “time” to be had and that their key motivation for playing is to feel involved in that “time.”

I begin with some different ways of thinking about play and introduce experience as an additional, critically important, element of play. I offer comments about the role of affect in human sense making, giving special attention to the concept of emotion. And I describe and evaluate the views of selected play theorists regarding the relationship between play and emotion before tendering my concluding remarks.

Five Common Ways of Thinking about Play

Like other human commitments, play can be defined—and in consequence, studied—in quite different ways. In the first, perhaps most common of these, some see play as a pattern of individual behavior, what they might call *action*. In such accounts, theorists present play as something organisms do, usually by choice. Players devise and execute action strategies: They move their bodies intentionally in one direction and then another; They express themselves. Generations of psychologists, recreationalists, and animal behaviorists have worked in this tradition.

A second perspective highlights the extent to which play is a pattern of *interaction* between individuals and the world elements with which they play. This approach emphasizes that players cannot—and typically do not wish to—manipulate the world with complete assurance. Instead, these scholars recognize play to be a pattern of give-and-take or assertion-and-response, what Brian Sutton-Smith (1978) calls a “dialectical” pattern of engagement. In play, individuals discover that they must adjust themselves to the movement of a bouncing ball, the ambition of the opponent across the net, or the slippery surface of the hill they climb. This approach, prizing as it does mutually engaged or potentially contesting elements, is central to explicitly social studies of play, including those commonly found in sociology, social psychology, and education.

Thirdly, and different again, are those who view of play as *activity*. Cham-

pioned by scholars in anthropology, folklore, and other disciplines that focus on culture and its implications, this approach describes behaviors stationed within sometimes quite lengthy, and highly conventionalized, encounters. Many kinds of activities occur—and are expected to occur—at a card party, a baseball game, or a high school prom. Only some of these (revealing one's cards, batting, or dancing) may be considered acts of play according to those who hold the first two views I have presented. But such play moments link coherently with many other behaviors (resting, eating, applauding, fidgeting, and keeping score, for example) that make up the event as a whole. When we play, we knowingly enter, inhabit, and put into action complicated forms of being (Simmel 1971) or frames of perception (Goffman 1974).

A fourth view holds play to be a *disposition*, some self-motivated, coherently directed way of orienting oneself to the world. This spirit, what Nina Lieberman (1977) terms “playfulness,” refers less to the actual behavior itself than to individuals’ readiness to convert many types of activity into play. Playful people are thought to have high levels of energy, enthusiasm, creativity, and wit. What some of us envision as drudgery or routine, they turn into something festive, surprising, and fun.

I should mention the opposite of this readiness as well. As Sara Smilansky (1968) stressed, some individuals can be so disadvantaged physically and emotionally as to have these capabilities threatened profoundly, perhaps irretrievably. Even animals that have been threatened with fearful effects suffer long-term reductions in ludic activities. And it bears mentioning that some theorists (Dewey 1902; Montessori 1992; S. Brown 2009) have championed the importance of combining this playful orientation with activities usually thought of as work. Such accounts value most individuals’ abilities to manage creatively and joyfully the terms of their own existence.

Fifth, and finally, some theorists identify play with the *context* in which it occurs (Rubin, Fein, and Zandenberg 1983). They envision play as behavior that arises out of the set of circumstances that occasion it, shape it, and give it energy. Typically, these contexts precede the moment of play and continue to exist after its conclusion. Often, these contexts are reaffirmed or strengthened by what the players do. But sometimes they are disaffirmed or reorganized. This latter theme is especially prominent in the theories of Brian Sutton-Smith (see Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne 1984), who argue that play is commonly not a straight-ahead or “progressive” development of already established traits but a more rebellious project that challenges recognized values and authority figures and explores uncharted behaviors.

Some of these supporting contexts—namely social, cultural, and psychological contexts—are primarily symbolic in character. Relationships of these sorts typically feature logical oppositions or tensions that play addresses and resolves, value commitments requiring periodic accentuation, or interconnections profiting from exploration and refinement. So understood as more an entry into the wider relationships of the world than a flight from them, play becomes something like a personality trait. To play means to address the valued objects, commitments, structures, and life processes of persons and societies.

For scholars like Sutton-Smith and others, physical patterns—relationships that are physiological, environmental, and psychobiological in character—run parallel to these symbolic contexts. Once again, such scholars find it difficult—even inappropriate—to separate play from these concurrent realities. Creatures play because the physical world permits them to do so. As those who design or encourage play environments have shown, some external conditions—whether naturally occurring or artificially created—seem to favor play (see Frost 1992; F. Brown 2003). Equally important are conditions within the bodies and brains of participants (see Burghardt 2005; Power 2005; Panksepp 2010). According to these theorists, play connects intimately with the form and functioning of species. Some life circumstances, including distinctive stages of individual development, seem optimal for play. To repeat, we play because we can—and because we must.

The Perspective of Experience

I think it important to recognize these different ways of viewing play and to honor contributions from the academic disciplines that employ these visions. Action, interaction, activity, disposition, and context are all legitimate frames for analyzing behavior. Nevertheless, I find something profoundly important missing from the views I have described.

Typically, people play—and keep playing—because something about the activity satisfies and sustains them. Not infrequently, play begins because its participants anticipate they will have a specific kind of experience. During the event itself, many kinds of awareness—some satisfying and others dissatisfying—are generated. At the event's conclusion, individuals may reflect on what just occurred, and the reminiscence may give them a certain type of satisfaction. The key questions here—whether people will have, are having, and have had a

good or bad time—center on these, largely subjective, assessments.

Humans are not only bodies in space that move mechanically from one spot to another. They are mindful creatures preoccupied with their own standings in situations—and with the possibilities of improving these situations. These patterns of awareness are not just cognitive matters, that is, dispassionate mental assessments of how one fares at any particular time. Quite the opposite, pleasure—and occasionally, pain—are play’s companions. Neurological and biochemical processes encourage and discourage participants at every turn. As Huizinga says in the quote with which I began this article, play simultaneously excites and incites.

The Importance of Affect

All creatures, so I argue, are preoccupied with their own standings in situations, that is, with “where” they are and with “what” they can do from that location (see Henricks 2015). The simplest animals participate in these processes primarily through sudden, reflexive adjustments to proximate environmental changes. More complicated animals maintain an awareness that they are somehow distinct or separate from the world in which they live. These creatures are consciously able to appraise their own internal functioning, to direct actions in response to these appraisals, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions they select. The dilemma is that no easy way exists to evaluate scientifically such issues in animals that cannot speak. At the animal kingdom’s highest levels—admittedly, an anthropocentric concept—creatures consider themselves to have identities that transcend their moment-to-moment involvement with physical conditions. In this regard, they sustain relationships with families, communities, deities, and other conceptualized entities. They position themselves in the history of their own lives.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994, 1999) discusses these matters as the evolution of different levels of consciousness. Humans participate in the most abstract forms of these levels. We reflect on past, future, and entirely imaginary affairs, and we ponder self-generated ideas and images as seriously as we do the present-time challenges of the world. However, even as we possess such spectacular, imaginative abilities, we remain dependent on much more basic—and evolutionarily prior—forms of consciousness (featuring many kinds and levels of sensory awareness) and, even more profoundly, on the nonconscious

monitoring that goes on within our bodies. To restate Damasio's general theme here—itsself a response to Descartes' great dictum about the privileged status of people's reasoning powers—consciousness, a fundamental function of brains, is embedded, inescapably, in the physicality of the world.

Consistently with this viewpoint, Damasio (1999, 16) emphasizes that “consciousness and emotion are *not* separable” [italics, Damasio's]. Although humans can operate in relatively affect-free ways—as when we fill in information for an application form or add a column of figures—most of our behaviors feature feelings of bodily commitment, engagement, or “tone.” Indeed, even in the examples of abstract thinking I mention, people may experience feelings of frustration, anxiety, boredom, and satisfaction. It is the human condition—and a critical dimension of our evolutionary heritage—to sense our own predicament, to discern the moments when we feel ourselves to be doing more or less “well.”

Increasingly, neuroscientists are able to locate the physiological sites of these feelings (Panksepp 1998, 2011). The oldest and most deeply centered regions of the brain—such as the thalamus and hypothalamus—process various forms of physical sensation and regulate conditions like hunger, thirst, and body temperature. The hypothalamus also plays a major role in pleasurable sensations; the amygdala is central for feelings of fear and anger. In addition, the brain has its own set of signaling substances—or neurotransmitters—that encourage activity (Vanderschuren 2010). Some of these, like dopamine, keep the body alert during periods of extreme difficulty or stress. Others, like the endogenous opioids and cannabinoids, effectively reward the brain for completing specific actions. Some thoughts and behaviors are experienced as pleasurable; others are hindered or punished.

Elsewhere in the body, glands—coordinated by the brain's pituitary—secrete a range of hormones that support activity and mood. Crucially also, the nervous system relays information between brain, organs, and muscular-skeletal formations (Plutchik 2003). Sympathetic nerves alert and energize bodily organs and muscle groups; parasympathetic nerves relax and inhibit. So conceived, the organism, especially its brain, becomes an extremely complex sense-making operation. Worldly occurrences are noticed by sense receptors; those registrations are evaluated—and at times responded to—by the recognition system that is the brain and its nervous system. Certain responses occur suddenly and without conscious deliberation. Others are directed rationally. Typically, successful functioning makes the body feel good.

Let me make two additional points. The first concerns the importance of

the neocortex, the more evolutionarily recent region of the brain. This region (in humans, more than three-quarters of the brain) processes sensory information, coordinates complex behaviors, codes and decodes language, and produces analytical thought. As crucial to our humanity as these abilities may be, they are built on more fundamental forms of sensory awareness and bodily response possessed by other species as well as our own.

The second point concerns the linkage between the neocortex and the older regions of the brain. Researchers, including those focusing on play in other species (Pellis, Pellis, and Bell 2010), are now discerning the relationships between specific brain areas (such as the cerebellum, which coordinates movement and balance) and rational processing centers that receive these impulses and integrate their messages with social learning, long-term objectives, and cooperative needs. Some of these researchers (Panksepp 1998, 2010) are seeking the neural conduits or pathways that enable these connections.

The general issue I am addressing here—the character of the physical interface between older and newer regions of the brain—is especially important in humans, who are able to delay or modify some of their responses to life challenges. Arguably, there are basic or primary kinds of feeling and response built into our physicality—and I shall return to this theme—but our species also participates in complicated cognitive realms that introduce new kinds of feeling and new patterns of action. To be sure, people possess basic needs and urges; but they also find themselves in the presence of softer, more psychologically fluid wants, wishes, interests, and desires. These feelings frequently have origins that defy easy identification. For much the same reason, they may be difficult to satisfy and contain.

Forms of Affect

The body provides its own resources to sustain and reward functioning. But what are the different patterns of awareness to which affective processes attach? In the following brief discussion of the several foci for energy and feeling, I emphasize the concept of emotion.

Considered at the most general or abstract level, affect—or physically tinged experience—colors individuals' behavioral style. Each of us, or so we believe, has a certain character or temperament that influences our demeanor and helps others anticipate what we will do and say. In ancient Greece and Rome—and on through the Renaissance—individuals thought temperament derived from a balance of four bodily fluids, or humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile (Radden 2000). For example, an excess of blood produced a

robustly optimistic or consanguine type. Too much black bile led to a depressive or melancholic disposition. Today, these ideas survive primarily as idiomatic expressions, as when we say we are “green with envy.” But individuals still seem to vary in terms of their characteristic levels of energy, optimism, flexibility, heartiness, and other factors.

Temperament differs from mood. Moods are temporal shifts in personal orientations. We may feel relatively good for hours, days, or even weeks and then, for reasons that are often unclear, lose that zest for living. In the worst cases, depression rules our lives. We may go through periods of anxiety, restlessness, and ill will. Whatever causes these changes, they are alterations in the organization and expression of affect that become internalized psychologically. Our moods accompany us from one situation to the next and influence our experiences of these situations.

Feeling-tinged ideas, or sentiments, are also transportable (Heise 2007). All of us have beliefs about the world that formalize our likes and dislikes, our feelings of attraction and repulsion. Sometimes these sentiments take the form of attitudes, of orientations to particular objects or categories of objects. We vow our support for one type of ice cream, baseball team, or political party and hate another. But our beliefs can be even more abstract, if still charged with feeling. As values, they represent our commitment to selected patterns of existence, including possibilities for human behavior. Such commitments make us feel good when we see them realized or affirmed. Oppositely, witnessing violations of these may produce powerful negative responses. Sentiments are necessary as orientation systems, for these predispositions help us sort out worthy and unworthy matters and initiate behaviors that seem, by their standards, right or proper.

At opposite end of the time-continuum are flows of affect associated with immediate awareness. All of us have capacities for both “sensing” and “sensation.” With regard to the first of these, our five senses are vehicles for registering external events. These sense perceptions are often accompanied by the evaluation that what we happen to behold seems more or less positive or pleasing. We may enjoy the scent of a rose, be disgusted by the bitter taste of some food, or find ourselves shocked by a scene in a movie. Arguably, some of these reactions are biologically fundamental, effectively the body’s system for approving and disapproving occurrences that affect physical maintenance. But most are influenced also by cultural standards we have internalized. That is, we have *ideas* about what kinds of sights, smells, touches, tastes, and sounds should be permitted and savored.

Sensation refers to patterns of internal awareness, the conscious registration of occurrences within the body. We feel sick to our stomachs, or have to use the bathroom, or find ourselves edgy or hungry. We experience the pangs of love—and lust. Like other forms of understanding, culture helps us notice, generate, and monitor these sensations. Some stirrings, like those associated with romantic love, may be culturally esteemed. Others, such as displays of disdain, fear, and self-loathing, may be publicly discouraged (Lutz 1988; Heelas 1986).

In all these ways, people experience themselves in the presence of *something*, whether internal or external (or, and more commonly, as a joining of that division). Some flows of affect empower and support behavior; others block or deny it. Because human orientation systems are so wide-ranging and complex, people routinely experience a mix of feelings or even confusion about what they should feel. Behaviors that feel good sensually (or aesthetically) can be judged morally unworthy, logically inconsistent, or practically ineffective, as the standard for evaluation shifts so one feels, by turns, good or bad. To recall a guiding theme of Freudian psychology, it is the human condition to live amidst conflicting commitments. Individuals desire—and regret—many kinds of things for many kinds of reasons.

Another important group of affects might be labeled “emotion.” To be sure, the concept of emotion, like most important ideas, has a long history of changing and disputed meanings (Solomon 1993). Academics and moralists disagree on the sources of emotion (spiritual, organismic, environmental, psychological, social, or cultural), on the ways in which these processes manifest themselves, on the extent to which emotions are feelings of which people are consciously aware, and of the possibilities for these feelings being controlled by the willful making of choices. We might consider some emotions basic or biologically prescribed (Ekman 1994); others, we contend, draw their character from social and cultural environments (Kagan 2007). Perhaps it is fair to say that there is a biological substrate that enables the coursing of feeling and connects these processes to bodily movements like facial expressions and physical gestures. But there are also more externally based contexts that trigger emotions and regulate their manifestations.

As we might anticipate, the concept of emotion receives special emphasis in academic psychology, which focuses on mental processes of noticing, appraising, and developing responses to conditions of varying types (Plutchik 2003). In this light, we can define emotions as “object-related affective states of mind” (Frijda 1994, 60), “stimulus evaluation checks” (Scherer 1994, 26), and

“appraisal mechanisms” that allow organisms to “selectively attend to stimuli” (Ekman 1994, 16). Psychological accounts usually see emotions as higher-order recognitions different from (if building on) more basic forms of sensing and from the awareness of pleasure and pain. Emotions help creatures respond to circumstances by short circuiting mental deliberations and by putting the body into action quickly. Although we should stress the beneficial functions of emotions as aids for confronting imminent threats and promoting social bonding, we also find that our emotions can get the better of us. Stirred by our passions, we respond too quickly or thoughtlessly and regret the consequences of what we have done.

My own view (see also Laird 2007) is that emotion is the situation-based registration and expression of self-awareness. That is, people experience emotions when private orientation systems (like the sentiments, attitudes, moods, and temperaments I have described) intersect with the challenges of circumstances. Those challenges may be external (as in the case of a tennis ball moving quickly toward a player) or internal (a pain in the stomach becoming a source of worry). We also react to matters that are cultural (perhaps the striking images presented by a poem or painting), social (someone’s compliment or rude remark), and psychological (our anticipations of a forthcoming event). Situations can be anchored in the past, present, or future, or be entirely imaginary in character. To have an emotion—or to be “in” one, to adopt Norman Denzin’s (1984) conception—is to find oneself in a predicament that invites a behavioral response. Emotions express our awareness of moving or being moved from one situational standing to another as well our awareness of being blocked from such movement.

In brief, emotions demonstrate our comprehension of how circumstances affect “me” or “us,” that is, affect our status as persons both individually and collectively. Comprehension does not mean only the fitting of perceptions of worldly occurrences to patterns of ideas and images we maintain internally. Neither does it mean only understandings based on symbols, that is, on publicly shared and circulated agreements about what ideas and images signify. Instead, and at a much more basic level, comprehension means all the recognitions by creatures of the changing conditions of their environments. Some of these recognition systems, it should be emphasized, are the physical heritage of our species. For that reason, “understanding” means “standing under” operating principles that are both physical and cognitive or symbolic in character. Antonio Damasio (1999) discusses more fully this issue of levels of comprehension—and of self.

On the one hand, such comprehension means that we recognize ourselves to be objects-in-the-world that can be influenced by other objects. On the other hand, emotions reflect our sense of being active agents in this world, of functioning as an “I” or “we” that perceives and reacts to what is happening. Although there are in most languages many words for emotions (and as a result, at least putatively, recognizably different emotions), most of these express the overall sense that individuals have become aware of their standings in given circumstances and what they might do to sustain or improve these standings.

Play Theory, Affect, and Emotion

As I have noted, there are many visions of the character of play and its implications. The same can be said for emotions. For that reason, we might well anticipate that different scholars will see the play-emotion connection differently. I next describe some prominent theories of how play and experience relate and offer comments on the implications of these relations.

Play as the Spending of Surplus Energy

German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller commonly receives credit for the theory of play as a release of surplus energy. In a series of letters on aesthetic education first published in 1794, Schiller (1965) posited the existence of a play drive or “impulse,” which supports joyful, creative exploit. Humans, as he sees it, operate with a divided spirit. Like other animals, we have sensual impulses that help us address our material needs for food, defense, and procreation. But we also have highly developed rational or “formal” impulses that encourage us to develop abstract models of the world and of our responsibilities within it. The play impulse represents a third force that stands between—and integrates—these impulses. When we play, we separate physical activity from its customary (e.g., bodily) necessities. At the same time, ideas are taken down from their lofty premises to be applied in real, material settings. In such ways, players hypothetically re-create the conditions of life. They inhabit a “*world of appearance* in the insubstantial kingdom of the imagination” (128 [italics, Schiller’s]).

When does this activity, which links sensuousness and symbolic form, typically occur? Schiller—who committed himself to understanding the relationships among freedom, creativity, and beauty—felt that people play most fully when they are freed from material necessity. Indeed, he contrasts play with work.

The playing human, as he sees it, resembles the lion, whose “idle energy creates for itself an object” and whose “exuberant roaring enjoys itself in purposeless display” (133).

Many of Schiller’s ideas influenced Huizinga (1955), who also believed in the cultural significance of expressive public displays and in the role of joy in sustaining these processes. Another follower, Herbert Spencer, as part of his evolutionary philosophy (1897), argues that “animals of higher types, having faculties more efficient and numerous” are “not wholly absorbed in providing for immediate needs” (628). Because they can satisfy their food and defense requirements with relative ease, they have a “surplus of vigour” that allows them to explore a wide range of behaviors and relationships.

Note that Spencer adds elements to Schiller’s concept. Spencer advances a theory regarding the build-up and discharge of nervous energy. When certain important functions of brain and body are not used regularly, those unused nerve centers “reach a state of excessive readiness to decompose and discharge” (628). That readiness is equivalent to what people feel as urgency or desire. Taken together—for they are somewhat different accounts—Schiller’s and Spencer’s theories stress the energetic expression and creativity of the rested, curious person. Schiller focuses on the drive to explore and synthesize via symbolic forms. Spencer emphasizes the role of rest and restlessness.

Clearly, both approaches can be criticized. Spencer’s theory makes a claim primarily for the importance of activity—both mental and physical—as a response to lethargy, boredom, and disuse. Inactive children need to expend energy. Having said that, Spencer offers no reason why this activity should take the form of play. Nor does Spencer’s theory confront the possibility that play itself may be energizing, that is, that it may be the basis by which exhausted people discover new sources of energy. For his part, Schiller provides a grand statement on the role of play in reconciling the opposing claims of mentality and physicality. As a poet and aesthetic philosopher, he was very interested in the role of play and creativity in human experience. His postulation of a play drive, I should note, finds some empirical support in neuroscientific research. But it is also important, I emphasize, that creatures reconcile the tensions of physicality and mentality with other life strategies besides play.

Still, one should not discount entirely the role of restlessness, pent-up energy, and curiosity in advancing play activity. As we have seen, Lieberman’s (1977) theory, though focused on cognitive style instead of emotional forcefulness, does stress the willfulness of (some) people to be creators of their own situ-

ations. To this degree, play expresses personal buoyancy. Pent-up psychological energy (meaning, the build-up of neurochemically controlled urges) translates into creativity of many types.

Play as a Physically Established Pathway

Can play be shaped, like other kinds of human expression, by physiological forms and processes? Do we play in ways that our particular species—and within that species, our particular stage of ontogenetic development—tells us we must? Charles Darwin considered the general issue of how physiology determines expression, including emotion, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Darwin compared the muscular-skeletal structures of the face in various mammals and concluded that emotions—and the facial expressions that express emotions—are rooted in physiology. Who of us has not felt his or her upper lip curl in a dog-like snarl, or stood openmouthed and wide-eyed in fear, or gaped in astonishment? In such ways we express our animal heritage.

Psychologist Paul Ekman (1973) gave a modern updating of this thesis. Ekman took photos of people exhibiting different emotions and displayed these photos experimentally to subjects from societies around the world. He asked the subjects to describe what the people in the photos were feeling and why they thought so. His respondents universally recognized six emotional expressions—surprise, fear, sadness, happiness, anger, and disgust. These emotions, Ekman claimed, are basic to humans and, perhaps, to other species as well.

Most people, I wish to point out, usually consider the six emotions to be “negative” in character. That is, most people think these emotions express dissatisfied feelings or hostile intentions. More than that, they associate them with sudden, highly organized movements away from—or against—a threat of some type. Effectively, such emotions shout to others: “Look out! A change in behavior is occurring.” In sharp contrast, happiness stands as the only positive emotion in Ekman’s list. People associate happiness with no specific action strategy but, instead, believe it indicates contentment with a current life station or behavioral trajectory.

Play, most readers would probably acknowledge, tends to be a happy state of affairs, and, indeed, anticipations of happy experiences motivate much play. Is the play-happiness connection hard wired in the circuitry of the brain? That question is important within a field of scholarship that Jaak Panksepp (1998) calls “affective neuroscience.” Panksepp’s research focuses on identifying structures in

the midbrain that support, and emotionally reward, basic forms of behavior. He calls one of these forms the SEEKING/expectancy system. To give an example of this system, creatures seeking food or sex find encouragement to persevere under what are often the most difficult conditions in part from the self-dosing of dopamine and other stimulants.

By studying responses to various kinds of brain stimulation in laboratory animals, Panksepp and his colleagues have named seven neural pathways. In addition to SEEKING/expectancy, they list RAGE/anger, FEAR/anxiety, LUST/sexuality, CARE/nurturance, PANIC /separation, and PLAY/joy. For them, play is something creatures have an urge (eventually, a “wish”) to do—and will do energetically if they have been deprived of the activity for a long period of time and are suddenly given the opportunity to play (see Panksepp 2011).

Discovering the architecture of these different circuits remains a work in progress. And I acknowledge as well the questions sometimes raised by scholars who think the differences between species are too great to sustain comparisons to humans based on research about laboratory animals. However, Panksepp (2010) argues that what he calls the “BrainMind has to be envisioned as an evolutionarily layered organ system, with all higher developments still anchored to the lower primary processes of the brain” (263).

Panksepp’s point, that higher and lower mental processes are integrated as bases of thought and activity, corresponds to a general understanding of neuroscience. However, the social PLAY behaviors of laboratory animals, such as rough-and-tumble fighting in rats, do not do justice to the much broader spectrum of human play activities. Recalling Schiller’s argument, people in their fullest humanity embrace artistic and aesthetic pursuits. They build, modify and disassemble symbolic systems. They compete and cooperate in complicated, rule-bound ways. They create highly particularized, hypothetically bounded worlds to live in and, in so doing, experience the satisfactions of that making.

Cognitive play of this more complicated sort needs to be grafted to the physical expressiveness I have already described. In Panksepp’s (2011) own model, primary-process emotions (which are deeply subcortical) are linked, in a circular fashion, to secondary-process learning (located in the upper limbic system) and to tertiary-process cognitions (which are centered in the neocortex). Many human expressions are the results of interactions between these different support systems.

As helpful as this model is, affective neuroscience still tends to reproduce a guiding theme of much biological science, which is to emphasize the

mechanisms that create, carry out, and monitor internally based drives and urges. We must integrate the (rightful) stress on bodily context with studies of other contexts—social, cultural, environmental, and cognitive and psychological—that influence behavior. Humans operate in situations of many types.

Animal behavior scholar Robert Fagen (2005) provides an evolutionary model of this complex pattern of involvement. Extending the tradition of Schiller and Karl Groos (1898), Fagen posits that there are five gates of evolution, each providing new kinds of challenges and concerns to species. He describes the first, and most fundamental, as the economic challenge of surviving physically in changing environments. He considers a second challenge or gate to be sexual selection, a pattern of preference for mate selection. This organization of sensual preference (appearance, smell, taste, and the like) leads to a third gate, which he calls the aesthetic. Creatures, Fagan argues, develop tastes for particular situations and stimuli. In humans, this is sometimes interpreted as an appreciation of beauty, especially the beauty of nature. Fagan calls his fourth gate the ludic gate, expressing the ability of creatures to take charge of their own pattern seeking. He sees this especially exhibited by behaviors that introduce disequilibrium and novelty. The increasing power to create and control the terms of existence leads to a fascination with abstraction and with realms of order (and disorder) that stand beyond worldly appearances. The fifth, and culminating, gate Fagan places in the wider field of appreciation he calls the agapic. At this level, emotion breaks free from “being dominating, controlling, exploitative, or selfish” (Fagen 2005, 31). Play becomes subordinated to an ethic of concern.

As we can see, Fagen’s theory attempts to show how basic kinds of noticing and evaluating are foundational to more sophisticated forms of appreciation. This ordering of choices or preferences is neither a strictly cognitive nor a strictly sensual enterprise but combines them in unified acts of judgment. Once established, certain choices prevail; only some conditions feel right or good.

Once again, studies of both the biological and cultural evolution of uniquely human capabilities seem very important. But symbolic patterns—social, cultural, and psychological—also prove fundamental to personal experience. These patterns introduce their own oppositions and tensions and call for modification into the human seeking for order. Biology does not explain well why we think one style of haircut or tie width or hem length looks best; why we find only some words to be causes for fighting; or why we prefer one type of sport, religion, or politics to another.

Play as Emotional Survival

Brian Sutton-Smith offers a theory combining several of the themes I discussed previously. As a folklorist and comparative psychologist, Sutton-Smith studied not only play's universal qualities but also its seemingly endless variations across societies and social groups. As he viewed it (2008; forthcoming), play functions as a way of calling out, confronting, and managing emotions.

Sutton-Smith was interested especially in the basic or primary emotions of surprise (or shock), anger, fear, disgust, sadness, and happiness. These he claimed to be motivating factors for different types of play and games. He states, "Shock (or surprise) is a major motivation in teasing and hazing; anger is a motivation in physical or mental contests; fear is a major motivation in risk-taking; disgust is a major motivation in the play forms that use profanity; sadness is a major motivation behind many festivals; and happiness is a major form of motivation in all the above forms of play" (2008, 114).

But Sutton-Smith did not consider different play forms to be mere indulgences of these emotions. Instead, he saw them as chances to exhume buried or latent feelings, to subject them to new levels of personal control, and, in that sense, to master their implications. In other words, we do not play just to experience fear, anger, and other fundamental feelings but to reacquaint ourselves with their challenges and, through this reacquaintance, to rob them of their powers over us. We enjoy community festivals because they demonstrate how isolation and sadness can be overcome through public resolve. We tell—and laugh at—gross jokes to show that we cannot be repulsed easily.

As Sutton-Smith continues, play's familiar panoply of "rules, traditions, and referees" exhibits the layering of sociocultural constraint on basic matters and with that layering, experiences of secondary and symbolic emotions like embarrassment, guilt, pride, and shame. So understood, play gives people opportunities to explore the cultural regimes in which they live and to examine the repercussions of their own standings before others.

The more general thesis here holds that encounters with—and successful control of—powerful emotions (whether primary or secondary) help people adapt to difficult and changing circumstances. Arguably, anger, fear, disgust, and the like have been useful responses to dangerous circumstances. In play, people imaginatively re-create circumstances that evoke these feelings and support their related behaviors, albeit in socially protected forms. In addition, they willingly expose themselves to the potential harms (as well as benefits) of socially regulated involvements. An important by-product of play then is the sharpening of

emotional skill sets, which may be useful in later, as yet unforeseen, conditions. In evolutionary terms, creatures with ready access to such skills have survival advantages over their ill-prepared fellows.

Sutton-Smith (2008) insists that the “major controlling motive remains, of course, happiness” (115). Players find pleasing the ability to manage the terms of their own lives, to confront ordinarily dangerous conditions—perhaps by skydiving, mountain climbing, exploring caves, fighting physically, even teasing—and to emerge from these relatively unscathed. Consistent with his more general theory, play cultivates variability in behaviors. We play to learn the many possibilities of the world and to develop skills for addressing whatever lies ahead.

As helpful as this approach may be, we can criticize it much as we criticized the biological approach. Sutton-Smith emphasizes the role of psychological—and especially, psycho-biological—factors in motivating what people do. For him, game forms emerge as evocations of basic emotions. However, sociocultural factors also contribute to these forms. Operating in often highly traditionalized formats, games link us with people from other times and places. They reflect the ongoing concerns of social groups as well as of individuals. They offer opportunities to create and modify their own frameworks. As a folklorist, Sutton-Smith understood all this well. But in this particular theory, he keeps within the biological and psychological camp.

Play as Therapy

The play-emotion link is especially important in therapy and care giving. Doubtless, improvements in personal functioning can be achieved by alterations in thinking processes (through the development of new interpretive frameworks), by medical practices (such as drug-based interventions), by social support systems (groups of caring others), and by the practicing and reinforcing new actions (emphasized in behaviorism). However, helping people confront and manage their own feelings—and supporting their acquaintance with different kinds of feelings—is surely fundamental as well. To operate assuredly in the world, people must have knowledge of the public and private meanings of emotions as well as the confidence to express these feelings in appropriate and personally beneficial ways.

In this regard, Freud’s account of these matters command attention. For the most part, Freud discussed play as a project of wish fulfillment. As Freud (1958) notes, the “child at play behaves like an imaginative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or more truly, he rearranges the things of his world

and orders it in a new way that pleases him better” (45). As he continues, chief among the child’s concerns is the desire to “be grown-up, the wish that helps to ‘bring him up.’” However, play is not simply daydreaming or fantasy, for it typically involves real-world elements and actions (albeit redefined by the player) that become the testing ground for imagination.

As a medical doctor, Freud was committed to understanding the physiological and biopsychological foundations of behavior. Because of this commitment, ideas about motivating internal forces—such as instincts, libidinal drives, and nervous excitement—as well as reactions to these forces took center stage. For the most part, Freud saw play as an expression of the pleasure principle, essentially, a quest to attain psychic satisfaction by discharging unpleasant build-ups of nervous excitation.

However, in a later formulation, Freud (1967) questioned his own theory. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he argues that playing children do not only seek libidinal pleasures or satisfactions that remove distress. Quite the opposite, they routinely re-create oppositions and difficulties for themselves. In Freud’s famous example of this, a toddler willfully throws a favored wooden object on a string out of his crib and then pulls it back into view. Something valued (for Freud, the reel was a symbol for the mother) is discarded and reclaimed, only to be discarded again. Apparently, or so Freud argues, the deeper satisfaction of this “game” comes from the experience of ego control. Through their own actions, children demonstrate their ability to renounce their attachments and to manage the emotions involved in these renunciations.

Later versions of psychoanalysis extend both these views of play. Some of these versions—exemplified by the approaches of Melanie Klein and Wilhelm Reich—stress largely unconscious or instinctual urges (both sexual and aggressive) that call for satisfaction. In a revision of such theories, some post-modern therapists (Deleuze and Guattari 1984) argue that individuals enjoy not only pleasurable release but also the processes of their own desiring. To this degree, the pleasure principle—now abetted by all manner of cultural supports—is restored.

Other styles of psychoanalysis, exemplified by the work of Anna Freud and Erik Erikson, redirect attention to ego control, including the ego’s strategies for contending with the more social, or secondary emotions. I take special note of Erikson’s famous typology of human development, in which he depicts maturing people as confronting different emotional issues as they move through life stages. As we age, we address a series of key emotional and relational polarities—trust

versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, and so forth. Ideally, we develop strategies that promote feelings of competence with regard to these issues and move on to the following stage with some confidence. Narrow challenges of self-management (reflecting the tasks of small children) lead to wider challenges of living with and supporting others.

Erikson's (1963) theory of play conforms to this viewpoint. As he describes it, play "is a function of the ego, an attempt to synchronize the bodily and social processes with the self" (211). As children develop, play shifts from control of body and mind (*autocosmos*) to the small world of manageable objects (*microsphere*) to relationships with individuals and other external forces (*macrosphere*). Participating in play situations, children inevitably confront their own feelings, especially in cases "when an emotion becomes so intense that it defeats playfulness" (223). The opposite of such "play disruption," he continues, is "play triumph." This occurs when "the ego, flooded by fear, can regain its synthesizing power through playful involvement and disengagement" (224).

Others, such as Lev Vygotsky (1976; see also Holzman 2008), have developed further the social implications of play. In Vygotsky's view, play is less a project of privately sponsored development than an activity created interactively, or dialogically, with others. Publicly shared understandings develop within the context of mutually oriented challenges and responses. Because of this process, successful play requires increasingly sophisticated cognitive and behavioral competencies. It also centers on feelings of trust or surety regarding human relationships (Winnicott 1971). Play displays the implications of attachment to and separation from others, of cooperation and competition, and of solidification and fragmentation of identity (Meares 2005).

These developments are generated in part by the collective acceptance of rules and other conventions, which limit behaviors and neutralize their usual consequences. This theme—play as symbolic world building—proves especially prominent in the writing of Greta Fein (1989), who studied sociodramatic explorations in very young children. One important aspect of children's play, she explains, is the way in which its scenarios allow children to bring to the surface deep-seated feelings and anxieties.

We may recall that this last theme was also prominent in Sutton-Smith's theory. There, play functioned primarily as an activity that reestablished needed emotional skills. In the examples of the therapeutic traditions I have been discussing, play is also, and especially, a way of developing trusting relationships with others through sociodramatic explorations. Such explorations, some think,

yield emotional lessons that become established as elements of personality. We play to enact new possibilities for our lives.

Play as Situational Involvement

The emerging tradition known as positive psychology emphasizes successful engagement with other people—and with otherness in its broadest sense. However, this approach focuses more on general life involvements that seem to support self-fulfillment and feelings of happiness than on clinical interventions. Said differently, here emphasis shifts from correcting psychological deficiencies to discovering and practicing the most salubrious thoughts, activities, and relationships.

The most influential representative of positive psychology within play studies, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991, 2000), seeks to identify conditions supporting the deepest feelings of situational involvement, a pattern of awareness he calls “flow.” Collecting self-reports of the experiences-in-activity of surgeons, artists, rock climbers, shoppers, chess players, and other role performers, he concludes that people are most fully engaged when the technical challenges of a situation (typically presented as a task of some type) match the skill level of the practitioner. Events requiring focused responses to sudden challenges encourage players to set aside their external concerns or even any consciousness of themselves as separate from their involvement. Activity and identity merge.

Less well-matched participants, such as two tennis players of differing ability, find that their awareness drifts from their activity to other matters. They become bored (understimulated) or anxious (overstimulated). In its emphasis on matching external conditions to personal responses, Csikszentmihalyi’s approach recalls earlier psychological theories that present play as a search for optimal levels of stimulation (see Berlyne 1960). In its focus on the bounded quality of the play events in which participants keep to a narrowly defined set of meanings and conduct quite limited actions, the approach somewhat resembles Huizinga’s magic circle. According to Huizinga (1955), to play is to enter a carefully configured world where only certain things matter and where past and future have no bearing.

Flow, in Csikszentmihalyi’s view (1991), is connected intimately with enjoyment and even happiness. Unlike pleasure (which he sees as self-centered release), enjoyment depends on stimulating connections to otherness. In contrast to pleasure, enjoyment expands people; it assists and rewards development.

People who participate effectively in worthy, complicated tasks are emboldened by their accomplishments. Having completed one challenge, they are ready for other, perhaps even more difficult, ones.

Barbara Frederickson (2001; Frederickson and Branigan 2003) has also studied the role of accomplishment in promoting personal well-being, which she calls the “broaden-and-build” theory of the positive emotions. As I have noted, negative emotions typically narrow action tendencies. When angry, afraid, disgusted, or sad, people tend to withdraw or jump forward in narrowly aggressive ways. Positive emotions also feature action tendencies, but these orientations are usually less focused and feel less demanding. And they also commonly involve a reaching out to, and supporting of, others. One feels ready for new challenges. Potential behavior patterns and objects of interests, as the theory’s name implies, broaden.

The description of play activities as carefully bounded worlds characterized by equilateral exchanges of participants and deep subjective engagement forms a very important theme in play theory. Surely, every player knows what it means to enter socially protected settings in which they abandon their external cares and focus their attention on a series of technical challenges. At the end of the well-played game, we often feel psychologically invigorated. That said, let us take note of some criticisms of this approach.

First, feelings of deep engagement may be found in other activities besides play, such as work (to recall Csikszentmihalyi’s surgeons), ritual, and forms of *communitas* (Henricks 2015). Second comes the related question of how well-matched people must be to their environments to experience play’s satisfactions and longer-term benefits. It may be that a balancing of claims and counterclaims between participants creates the most effective route for ensuring positive feelings for everyone involved. But it is also the case that play commonly occurs when power relations get out of balance.

In this regard, some play can be described as manipulative, as a practicing of skills on a relatively impassive world (Piaget 1962). Some play may be rebellious, a jibing at authorities too powerful to be confronted directly (Sutton-Smith 1997). And some play occurs when the players are relatively disconnected from—or marginal to—the objects of their orientation. In this latter sense, play is less a pattern of deep engagement with practical matters than it is an “exploratory” journey of the imagination (Singer and Singer 1990). To summarize, players operate from different standings. Different styles of play may produce different experiences and life lessons (Henricks 2015).

Play as Spiraling Involvement

Csikszentmihalyi's theory emphasizes one particular pattern of involvement—deep engagement or flow—which is foundational for enjoyment and, in its most extended dimensions, happiness. However—and as the above criticisms suggest—it seems reasonable to ask whether there are different levels, or even stages, of engagement and if these different forms of awareness lead to other standings and experiences. This question is central to Scott Eberle's (2014) model of play as a spiraling, emergent process.

Eberle opposes strict definitions of play as well as descriptions that impute linear direction and certainty to its processes. Instead, he envisions play as activity that initially intrigues individuals, as might the experience of a thrill ride or haunted house. Entering the play setting, participants assert themselves in ways that feed their curiosities. But they quickly discover they are being drawn in ever more deeply by the experiences they are having and by their fascination with what may happen next.

Figure 1 displays six elements central to the play experience. The first of these is anticipation. As Eberle (2014) sees it, we should understand this as “an imaginative, predictive, pleasurable tension.” Anticipation seems not just a prelude to action. Instead, and as Eberle continues, “To prepare for play is to begin to play” (222). This urge for engagement, it should be noted, is also fundamental to other kinds of SEEKING, to use Panksepp's term.

A second element is surprise, that is, individuals' sudden reactions to conditions of unexpected novelty or discontinuity. Recalling Csikszentmihalyi's theme, too much stimulation (perhaps an overly creepy scene at a haunted house or an individual's aggressive behavior) breaks the play frame. Too little stimulation is boring—and dismissed as being unworthy of the players' attention. Instead, unpredictability and suspense must stay inside their proper latitudes, boundaries that may change as players become more familiar with their circumstances. Increasingly curious now, they move ahead.

The third element is pleasure. These—for there are several levels of pleasure in his model—are the psychic rewards that come to those who balance their anticipations and actions with the conditions they discover. Once again, rewards do not complete the activity, they move it forward. We want more of this experience—and beyond that, more complex, inspiring bursts of it.

Elements four, five, and six are understanding, strength, and poise. In part, these are satisfactions in themselves. But they are also new levels of comprehension and capability that help players do new kinds of things. With regard to the

	Anticipation	Surprise	Pleasure	Understanding	Strength	Poise
interest	appreciation	satisfaction	tolerance	stamina	dignity	
openness	awakening	buoyancy	empathy	vitality	grace	
readiness	stimulation	gratification	knowledge	devotion	composure	
expectation	excitement	joy	skill	ingenuity	ease	
curiosity	discovery	happiness	insight	wit	contentment	
desire	arousal	delight	mutuality	drive	fulfillment	
exuberance	thrill	glee	sensitivity	passion	spontaneity	
wonderment	astonishment	fun	mastery	creativity	balance	

Play Elements

Figure 1. Play Elements presented as a linear sequence. Find a full-color downloadable version of this chart at www.museumofplay.org/play-elements.

first of these, Eberle seems particularly interested in the type of understanding that features the mutually acknowledged subjectivity and emotional attunement of the players. He also values increasing knowledge of the character of the object world (and of techniques to manipulate it). But the more complicated forms of play invite participation in other people’s imaginations.

Understanding leads to the fifth quality, strength, which combines capability with confidence. Emboldened, players believe they can overcome the most daunting obstacles. Sixth, and finally, is poise. This is the quality of personal stability, vision, and resolve. Successful players have learned something about where they stand in the world. They recognize that the balance between their own capabilities and the powers of the world is inevitably precarious and that new play forays are called for to refine that relationship.

Because play is unpredictable in its course, it may not progress steadily in the fashion I have described. Participants find their share of successes and

failures, pleasures and pains. In general, however, play events center on positive emotional experiences, and these promote confidence in other life settings. Eberle stresses also that his six play elements are not static categories but rather ranges of circumstance that manifest themselves at different levels of dimensionality and depth. Thus anticipation, to take one example, may migrate from interest to openness and then to readiness, expectation, curiosity, desire, exuberance, and wonderment. Surprise, to take another example, moves from appreciation to awakening to stimulation. Deeper levels are excitement, discovery, arousal, thrill, and astonishment.

As figure 1 suggests, experiences move in different directions across the chart. That is, recognitions or orientations flow from one pattern to another—and sometimes back again—as the player confronts the occurrences of the event. For such reasons, play events tend to feature a mix or blend of feelings (see also Plutchik 2003). All this comports with Eberle's more general view that play is less a self-managed, cognitively calculated activity than it is a journey into a world filled with largely unanticipated challenges and experiences.

In pointing to the many possible involvements of players, Eberle's model is an important expansion of Csikszentmihalyi's ideas about deep engagement or flow. Surely, play offers many kinds of experiences. Surely also, the character and intensity of these experiences vary as the players move through the event; and different players involved in the same situation presumably have different feelings about what is occurring at any point. One effect of Eberle's theory is to loosen scholarly understandings of play, or at least to free them from the concept that play is a carefully directed, cognitively managed pursuit. Because his theory points to so many feeling-based conditions as relevant to the play experience, it does not lend itself easily to the empirical verification that Csikszentmihalyi's much simpler model has found. In a quite different spirit then, Eberle seeks to identify play's broad range of plausible and congruent meanings. Such a project helps integrate more narrowly focused studies and suggests new paths for research.

Play as a Pathway of Experience

I have offered another model of play's emotional processes (Henricks 2012, 2015). I have been preoccupied with the question of how to distinguish play (understood in terms of the several perspectives identified at the start of this essay) from other, equally fundamental behaviors. This means comparing play to work, ritual, and *communitas*. I hold each of these four activities to be distinctive

behavioral trajectories, or pathways of experience.

Play's particular pathway features the development and implementation of strategies for attaining goals. Stated more plainly, in play people conceive possibilities for their own actions in the world. These are implemented, evaluated, and refined. Often, modifications occur as sudden adjustments to situational shifts. Pointedly, and as I noted earlier, play sometimes takes the form of studied, careful manipulation of a relatively inert object world. It may also emerge as a pattern of resistance or rebellion against the world or, differently again, as a more distant (or marginal) exploration by the imagination. Finally, it frequently occurs as the pattern of dialogical engagement or interchange emphasized by Csikszentmihalyi, Eberle, and many other students of play. In every case, players address a general concern: What are the many possibilities for action presented by the situation at hand and what are the personal implications of these?

Although play may be conducted for various reasons, I emphasize the usefulness of this behavior for self-realization. I might argue that work (as goal-centered employment of the most effective and efficient practices) is a better tutor of adaptive skills; ritual more effectively teaches obligations to otherness and reliance on guiding forms; *communitas* makes people realize their connections to the world and the possibilities of mutual support within it. All of these are extremely important forms of self-awareness. Viewed in this context, play's special gift is to expand and solidify people's awareness of their ability to construct creatively and monitor the terms of their own lives.

My theory of the emotions supports this approach. People seek to comprehend their circumstances and move forward on those terms. Emotions are (what we call) these registrations of predicament. My value-added, or stage, model of emotions (Henricks 2012) describes emotion building as a succession of recognitions and responses in which people notice, evaluate, and attribute causal sequence to the goings-on of the world. These appraisals of occurrences are then "integrated with self-functioning" and, finally, manifested as "orientations for action" (115). One of the most important reasons that people play is to experience and cultivate this range of feelings.

However, and as others have emphasized, there is no limited set of emotions associated with play. Recalling Sutton-Smith's thesis, players deliberately court feelings of fear, anger, disgust, and so forth. Rather, and following both Sutton-Smith's and Eberle's accounts, what play does is place these patterns of awareness into protected ranges, or latitudes, of experience.

In my view, play provides a positive toning or overlay for emotional expe-

rience. It does this by establishing a coherent sequence for how the event (that is, what we understand a play event to be) is likely to proceed. That sequence is presented in figure 2. Much as Eberle says, play starts with feelings of anticipation, especially curiosity. If pursued as actions, these feelings lead to distinctive feelings of the present, essentially, experiences based on current events. For me, play typically features limited or segmental bursts of activity, small behaviors started and completed and then started and completed again.

In this light, players initially try to unsettle worldly circumstances and, almost immediately, find themselves unsettled by the world's response to their assertions. I call these feelings of unsettlement, exploration, and disorder *fun*. At least they are fun when they conform to players' own guidelines regarding the character and consequences of uncertain processes. Upon the conclusion of each play burst, there are times (sometimes, mere instants) for consolidation and appraisal. These are said to involve feelings of restoration and order that I call exhilaration, the sense of being pleurably spent or played out.

At the conclusion of the event (which may be composed of many play episodes) there are feelings of remembrance. Here, or so individual players claim, they experience gratification, the comprehension that they have actively created a good time out of problematic circumstances, ones that seemed, perhaps, initially uninteresting or difficult or scary. And though play is often a privately conducted affair, these experiences can be achieved collectively; indeed, other people may help name and consolidate the tone for the event. In common enterprise, we play and we savor feelings that can be described in the terms I have used.

The three other pathways of self-chosen behavior present their own sequences of positively toned feelings. As displayed in figure 2, work moves from self-confidence to interest to satisfaction to pride. Ritual moves from faith to enchantment to rapture to reverence. Communitas features a sequence of hope, delight, joy, and blessedness. Although I emphatically believe these to be quite different pathways that should be recognized as providing distinctive life lessons, it seems clear to me that real-world events commonly combine these themes. I find especially prevalent mixes of play and communitas, events that join the creative powers of persons with respect for the wonders of unfolding scenes and situations.

Like Eberle, I wish to emphasize that play is a transition or process. Like Eberle's, my approach expands ideas about play's dimensionality and direction. In contrast to my model, however, Eberle's displays more clearly play's fluid and nonlinear qualities as well as the extent to which play events feature engagement with ever-changing external conditions and challenges. Play activities—and their

	Feelings of anticipation	Feelings of the present		Feelings of remembrance
Ritual Other-directed enjoyments (mystery)	Faith	Enchantment	Rapture	Reverence
Communitas	Hope	Delight	Joy	Blessedness
Play Self-directed enjoyments (mastery)	Curiosity	Fun	Exhilaration	Gratification
Work	Self- confidence	Interest	Satisfaction	Pride

(Feelings of exploration/
disorder) (Feelings of
restoration/
order)

Figure 2. Four sequences of positive emotions (Henricks 2011, 244)

players—move in many directions. Opportunities for cooperation, even communitas, are recognized. And my model, featuring as it does repeated segments or bursts of activity, is more linear than Eberle’s.

This linear quality becomes most evident when we think of play as individually directed, or expressive, action. However, as I noted at the start of this essay (Henricks 2015), I think it is also important to see play as interaction and as activity. When these two perspectives are applied, the dialectical and nonlinear aspects of play are increasingly visible. Despite these possibilities for uncertain, open-ended action (qualities Eberle emphasizes), I tend to emphasize the role of assertive, contesting individuals who seek to create and maintain their own systems of meaning. Both our approaches stress the intimate connection between personal standings, emotional feelings, and responsive behaviors.

Conclusions

As I noted in the introduction, accounts of the relationship between play and emotion (and affect, more generally) differ because there is no firm agreement among scholars about the character of the terms at issue. Although I have identified several different forms in which affect is organized and expressed, it seems clear that scholars may place any one of these forms at the center of their play theory. Pleasure, energy, excitement, sentiment, sensation, primary emotion, and so forth are related but different matters. There is, as yet, no general theory of human awareness and its implications.

Despite these difficulties, I have explored here some dimensions of this wider project. In my view, scientific studies of the physical fundament of affect—both its structures and processes—need to be recognized and extended. Ideas of basic or primary emotions, as one portion of our evolutionary heritage, are important. Bodies and brains operate via physical conduits or pathways. These pathways make some thoughts, feelings, and behaviors possible and exclude others. Certain kinds of activity are motivated and rewarded by internal supports. Pointedly, these internal patterns arise as adaptations to the character and challenges of impinging natural environments. As responses to physical predicaments, emotions must be understood in the context of environmental-organismic interchange.

The relationship of these basic forms of experience to higher levels of cognitive processing requires further study. Humans live amid publicly maintained systems of symbolic and material resources; some elements of these become internalized, or otherwise appropriated, as personal orientation systems. Many emotions are generated by perceiving the relationship (and not uncommonly, the tension) between socio-cultural patterns and our own desires and schemes for living. Many are a result of our sense that other people are watching—and judging—what we do. Those secondary emotions—complicated assessments of guilt, shame, remorse, and the like—are as fundamental to being human as the rawer forms of appetite, defense, and withdrawal.

I see emotions as a one of many systems of recognition-and-response that function in individuals. Emotions register—and often express in quite visible ways—comprehensions of how selves (in the fullest meaning of the term) are doing in situations (again, in the fullest meaning of this). For these reasons, people may fear a loved one dying, losing a job, an investment declining in value, or suffering shame from authority figures in the same way they fear a charging

predator or a dangerous shift in the weather. For studies of affect, the challenge is to understand the connections between experiences of these more abstract matters and those related to intimate, physical existence,

Play, as we've seen, embraces affect in its widest dimensions. Commonly, and as Schiller stresses, play joins sensuality and abstraction. At one level, play behaviors express personal needs, urges, desires, and understandings. At another, they reflect our ongoing attempts to recognize and manage these concerns, to actuate them in real-world contexts, and to adjudge their repercussions. Sutton-Smith's theory suggests the survival advantages of keeping emotional skills sets sharpened. The Freudian tradition emphasizes that cognitive satisfactions—attained by controlling emotions—may be as important as the fulfillment of basic, libidinal urges.

For most of the scholars I have described, play functions as a testing ground or laboratory for behavioral possibilities. These possibilities include the challenges of danger and disarray and of the inability of people to control situations just as they wish. Although players repeatedly court difficulty and tension, they tend to prefer settings that protect them from serious life threats and that allow them to confine social and psychological repercussions to the event at hand. In such settings, players are encouraged to balance and unbalance their own standings and then to respond to the world's responses to these standings in assertive, creative ways.

To the extent that participants respond well (as judged by their own standards) to these intentionally unpredictable circumstances, enjoyment or fun is said to be had. To restate Sutton-Smith's theme, play in general entails no particular set of emotions; players routinely address difficult challenges and confront their basic fears and anxieties.

But play does layer every scenario with the prospect that what occurs there can be the foundation for satisfying feelings, the broader pattern of self-comprehension we call happiness, and the confidence that derives from these evaluations. This quality of optimism, pleasure, and high spirits is central to Sutton-Smith's thinking and to Panksepp's neural pathway, PLAY. Some of its variable expressions are explored by Eberle and myself. In the spirit of Schiller and Huizinga, such theorists seek to identify the life energies that move players into and through the events that inspire and sustain them.

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