

# **Learning to Play, Playing to Learn: A Case Study of a Ludic Learning Space\***

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## **Abstract**

Play is an intrinsically motivated phenomenon, rewarding in itself, that manifests throughout our lives and contributes to our ability to maintain cognitive plasticity, imagination, spontaneity and creativity. In this paper we examine the formation of a pick-up softball league where for fifteen years, a group of individuals diverse in age group, gender, level of education, and ethnic background have come together to play on Sundays. Over time, the field of play evolved as a unique ludic learning space, where members of the league continue to create, re-create, and sustain a self-organizing system through play. Drawing from play research in ethology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and organizational behavior, this study attempts to uncover the underlying play principles which contributed to the emergence of such a space. The evolution of the case suggests that the play space evolved from an early phase where attention was focused on creating and defining a safe space for all, to a second phase where players intentionally engage in playful behavior to learn and develop the skill to play the game, to a later stage where playful attitude were extended beyond the confines of skill development to a deeper commitment to character building and personal change.

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## INTRODUCTION

*If we build it, they will come.*  
- *Field of Dreams*-

The cultural historian, Huzinga (1950) contends that from the very beginning, cultures evolved in forms of play. The instinct of play pervades all human endeavors: in law, science, war, philosophy, and in the arts. Through the eyes of Huizinga, humans emerge not as “*Homo sapiens, the man who knows,*” but primarily as “*Homo ludens, the man who plays.*” In his words,

The human culture developed *in* play-like contest, in an almost childlike play-sense expressing itself in various play-forms, some serious, some playful, but all rooted in ritual and productive of culture by allowing the innate human need of rhythm, harmony, change, alternation, contrast and climax, etc., to unfold in full richness... Coupled with this play-sense is a spirit that strives for honor, dignity, superiority and beauty. In play, therefore, the antithetical and agonistic basis of civilization is given from the start, for play is older and more original than civilization. (p.75)

Play encompasses a wide range of activities and forms both in human and animal world. From the play-fight of kittens, imaginary play of a child, to the more abstract play of adult games and organized sports, it permeates our lives as a significant source of creativity, imagination, and fun. While play has undoubtedly been a unique and universal human experience across cultures, it has also been the subject of scholarly inquiry across diverse fields of social science with a substantial accumulation of theoretical and empirical evidence about its significance in the process of individual expression and adaptation. As Sutton Smith (1997) puts it, “multiple kinds of play and multiple kinds of players” are involved in the inquiry of play. “Some study the body, some study behavior, some study thinking, some study groups or individuals, some study experience, some study language- and they all use the word play for these quite different things.”

To cite a few, in the field of ethology play is defined as a distinct form of behavior possessing serious biological, developmental, functional, and evolutionary implications in animal life ( Bekoff and Byers, 1998; Darwin,1965, 1981, Fagen,1981, 1984, 1994; Goodall, 1995; Groos,1898; Lorenz,1971). In philosophy, Gadamer (1999) contends that the common ground of human understanding is achieved through the play (spiel) of speakers who engage in conversation within the safety of a play space (spielraum). In psychology, Piaget (1962) defined play as a process of assimilation of experiences through which a child reaches higher levels of cognitive development. Freud (1965) saw in the primary process of thinking, freedom for individuals to express inhibited needs and troublesome desires in the forms of dreams, fantasy and play. In their recent theoretical formulation of the role of play in the field of organizational behavior, Mainemelis and Ronson (2006) contend that play constitutes an important form of engagement and creativity in organizational processes. Finally, in art, Nachmanovitch (1991) defined play as resource for living our lives fully, with ingenuity and creativity, whoever we are and whatever we do.

Drawing from this multidisciplinary knowledge of play (Kolb 2000), this paper will investigate the possibility of creating a space where individuals engaged in play behavior, away from the formal, institutional context of learning. We contend that play opens up the possibility for a different kind of learning, where the absence of familiar rules and conventions that dictate formal educational settings or workplaces are replaced by an emergent, self-organizing principles generated within the play space. Entering the sixteenth year of its existence, our Sunday Free Play Softball League will serve as a case study of such a space. Individual players have spontaneously joined the game at different

points in time with varying skill levels, life experience, unique disposition and temperament contributing to the ever changing configuration and livelihood of the play space.

In the first part of the paper, we introduce three streams of play concepts as the theoretical underpinnings of the play phenomenon: the epistemological and ontological dimensions of play, the role of play in learning and development, and the concept of ludic space. The second part of the paper will be devoted to the description of the life and history of the softball league as it evolved over time and continues to grow, change, and renew the space, as new members join in, and the legacy of those who physically left the league continue to sustain the game and shape the collective experience of the play space.

In the third part of the paper, we will focus on how learning occurs in such a space. We contend that the learning that takes place in the play space is of a different kind, devoid of formal evaluation and extrinsic rewards or punishments. Weaving the play concept developed in part one, we postulate that play facilitates deep commitment to learn, develop, and grow, as players are intrinsically motivated to define for themselves what to learn, how to deal with change, and ultimately reinventing themselves within the safety of the play space.

## **THE CONCEPT OF PLAY**

Play is a complex behavior, difficult to grasp or define, with wide conceptions regarding its nature, purpose, and the way in which it manifests itself. The lack of consensus as to what constitutes play has produced a proliferation of views and definitions of play as “purposeless activity” ( Bekoff and Byers, 1981), fundamentally

different from “earnest” activity (Lorenz, 1994), “amphibious,” ( going simultaneously in both directions) (Spurius, 1989), a “vacation from reality” (Erikson, 1950), “any activity a body is not obliged to do” (Twain, 1988), or an intrinsically driven activity without a clear goal other than its own activities (Brown, 1995). Despite such multitude of definitions and characterizations, our multidisciplinary review of play literature (Kolb, 2000) reveals three interconnected streams of play concepts that provide a useful framework from which to understand the phenomenon of play.

### **Epistemological and Ontological Dimensions of Play**

Play exists precariously between the ontological and epistemological poles of a dialectic variously labeled the irrational and rational, playful and serious, imaginary and real, arbitrary and rule bound (Huizinga, 1950; Hutt, 1981; Spurius, 1989; Sutton-Smith 1997; Turner, 1974). For the most part, playful situations occur in a narrow space and time when the rational and irrational reach a tenuous balance, with neither dimension overshadowing the other. As Erikson (1950) puts it, in order to experience play, one needs to be “free from the compulsions of conscience and from impulses of irrationality” (p. 187).

According to Huizinga (1950), the dual worldview embedded in the dialectics of rational and irrational play is shared by many cultures, where “play,” and “earnest”, “serious” and “non serious” represent two diametrically opposing concepts. In his view, the Greek terms *agon* (competition) and *paidia* (play) which surfaced in his cross-cultural comparison of play language best describe this antithetical relationship. From ancient

Greek era to the present, the dialectical struggle of *agon* and *paidia* finds its resting point along the continuum of the two polarities at different points in time (Spariosu, 1989).

In ancient Greek mythology play was primarily used as a game metaphor to represent the power relationship between the Gods and humans, and words such as *agon* (competition) and *athlon* (contest) were direct representations of play as a mythological expression of this power struggle (Spariosu, 1989). Plato (1970) held a rational, moral, and non-violent view of play. Plato characterized play as an irrational activity undertaken by all young children, needing to be bound by rational rules. His preoccupation with the education of man leads Plato (1991) to make the transition from *paidia* (play) to *paideia* (education) stating that, “unless a man has transcendent nature he would never become good if from earliest childhood his play isn’t noble and all his practices aren’t such” (p. 236).

For Kant (1987), play was as an aesthetic framework from which to judge the epistemological and ontological struggle inherent in the artistic and creative process. True art can be communicated as a unified, purposive experience only if it is created in play. In his own words,

We regard free art as an art that could only turn out purposive if it is play,...an occupation that is agreeable on its own account; mercenary art we regard as labor.....that attracts us only through its effect (e.g., pay) so that people can be coerced into it. (p. 171)

Schiller (1967), in his view of aesthetics as the moral guidance of man, proposed the idea of “aesthetic zone,” where the “play impulse” (*speiltrieb*) resides and acts as a catalyst of the sensuous (*sinnliche trieb*) which represents the concrete aspect of human experience and the rational dimension (*formtrieb*), bringing the two otherwise conflicting

elements of human nature into unity (Cooper, 1995). For Schiller, play represented the highest form of human manifestation:

Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense the world a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays. (p. 107)

Once a basketball player and later a philosopher, Hyland's (1984) world of play is experiential in nature, where the dialectic of play is lived first hand within the confines of a basketball court. Hyland contends that play cannot be understood within a rigid dichotomy of rational and irrational, playful and non-playful or serious and non-serious activity. Rather, one needs to fully embrace the duality embedded in play. In his view, the duality commonly experienced in play is related to the tension between dominance and submission dynamics that co-exist in a very precarious fashion in that, "excessive responsiveness easily devolves into dominance, and excessive openness into submission" (p.52). In his own experience, this tension is easily seen in the basketball game when excessive domination and aggressiveness aimed primarily at "beating the opponent" drive the spirit of play out of the game.

### **The Role of Play in Learning and Development**

If the dialectical tension between the epistemological and ontological human endeavors was at the center of philosophical dialogue on play, a similar overarching pattern emerges in education, psychology and ethology through investigations of the role of play in the process of adaptation in humans and other mammals. These studies suggest that the dialectical tension between *agon* and *paidia*, is deeply ingrained in the learning process. From childhood to maturity, play has a central place at each stage of

development in its different forms, styles and meanings (Erikson, 1950; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Wolf, 1984).

Mellou (1994) offers a typology of play theories in Psychology from which we can understand the dialectics of play inherent in the learning process. The first theory known as arousal modulation theories of play (Berlyne, 1960; Ellis, 1973; Hutt, 1985), uncovered stimulus seeking activity that leads to two distinctive modes of play behavior; epistemic and ludic modes of play. Hutt (1981) uncovered substantial behavioral differences when children are in the epistemic mode vs. ludic mode. In the epistemic period of play, the child's attitude was that of seriousness and focus, followed by intense, attentive investigation of all aspects of the toy. Once his investigation was over, he then proceeded to handle the toy playfully. As the child transitioned to the ludic mode, in a relaxed manner he proceeded to apply the knowledge gained through investigation in his play. As Hutt commented, 'the quest changed from inquiry to invention, and the child no longer asked himself "what does this object do? But "what can I do with this object?"' (page. 50). In Berlyne's (1960) conceptualization, ludic activities "are those in which perceptual and intellectual activities are engaged in for their own sake and not simply as aids to handling of practical problems." (p.49)

Recent developments in neuroscience reveal how the external manifestation of play is connected to the internal functioning of the brain. Hannaford (1995) contends that play operates as an integrative process between the limbic system and the frontal lobe of the neo-cortex, by transforming and integrating the sensory stimuli into meaningful thoughts and behaviors. This is similar to Zull's (2002) description of how brain functioning follows the process of experiential learning. Different modes of play

behavior seem to be related to different ways the brain process information. The epistemic behavior seems to correspond to the left hemisphere of the brain's functioning, which is abstract, symbolic, analytical, digital, linear, rational and logical, whereas ludic behavior may be associated with the right hemisphere, which is synthetic, concrete, analogic, non- rational, spatial, intuitive and holistic (Edwards, 1989). The studies of animal play in neuroethology suggest that humans and other mammals share similar play behaviors associated with their neural plasticity (Height and Black, 2000). A cross species comparative study suggests that play has a central role in brain development, facilitating the integration of cognitive, social, affective, and sensorimotor systems in mammals (Bekoff & Meyes, 1998; Fagen, 1981; Smith, 1982).

The psychodynamic theory of play (Erikson, 1985; Freud, 1965) focuses on the role of play in the individual's emotional development; play facilitates the expression of positive and negative emotions, the ability to resolve conflicts, and provides a process of engaging in fantasy and imagination. Of particular importance in Freud's work on play is his concept of primary process and secondary process as forms of psychological adaptation. Through the primary process of thinking, individuals express inhibited needs and troublesome desires in the forms of dreams, fantasy, and play. The secondary process calls for the individual's rational and rule bound form of adaptation to the society and environment at large. For Freud, a well adapted individual is able to integrate both processes in a balanced fashion. Building on Freud's idea, Erikson (1950) sees "play as the royal road to the understanding of the infantile ego's effort at synthesis." Play fulfills the need of the child's ego to master different aspects of his life and helps integrate his body, spirit and mind in a non-threatening way.

The cognitive developmental theories of play (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1966, 1967) explain the role of play in the childrens' cognitive development, creativity, innovation and adaptive flexibility. Through an extensive observation of children's play, Piaget (1962) contended that in early childhood, cognitive development occurred through the complementary processes of adaptation: imitation and play. Imitation would evolve into accommodation and play into assimilation at a later stage of cognitive development. Piaget observed that assimilation occurs when a new experience is incorporated into the preexisting knowledge, whereas accommodation occurs when an individual structurally adjusts to newly acquired information. In assimilation, the child's primary concern is to mold reality to the self; the child distorts reality in the service of his own ego with no interest in adapting to it. In accommodation, an opposite dynamic takes place. The child adapts the self to reality, by copying what is experienced for its own sake, with no intention of incorporating the new reality to the preexisting cognitive structure. For Piaget, play provides a rich context in which children interact with the environment and create their own knowledge about the world.

For Vygotsky play constitutes a primary context for cognitive development whereby a child creates his or her zone of proximal development. A child develops capacity for self-regulation, by learning to create a constraint-free situation, molded to their own ego. By doing so, they subordinate themselves to their own rules, since from this surrendering to the rules and controlling their impulsive actions, they derives enormous pleasure and joy. As Vygotsky observed, a child in play acts "as though he were a head taller than himself" (1978, p.102).

Studies reviewed thus far suggest that epistemic and ludic behaviors are distinct and complementary forms of play inherent in developmental process. Epistemic behavior is essentially characterized by efficient, economical and goal specific behavior, whereas ludic behavior concentrates on means rather than ends. The epistemic behavior appears to be related to the solutions of problem at hand, applying different kinds of skills required for a particular context. It prepares the learner to respond to the immediate demands of the present based on constraints imposed by external factors. Ludic behavior is spontaneous, requires the learner to make connection between past and present experiences in a creative way, encouraging invention of new things from familiar objects. In Freudian terms, ludic play is related to the primary process whereby individual can adapt the reality to one's ego in a non rational way, whereas the epistemic play requires individual adaptation to the external world. Similarly for Piaget, a healthy adaptation requires the harmonious integration of both modes of play.

### **Ludic Space**

What characterizes the spaces where playful behaviors thrive? What are the core principles that sustain the livelihood of such a space? We will examine the central concepts of play space from ethological, anthropological, psychological, and philosophical perspectives.

For Huizinga (1950), play has three central characteristics; it is free, it is stepping out of the "real" life, and it is bounded in space and time. Contrary to widely held view of play as non-serious activity, Huzinga contends that play is an activity of utmost seriousness which is played out within a "consecrated spot" mentally and physically, with

strict rules of its own. Because it begins and ends within a limited time, it demands order, and the slight deviation from it will collapse the play space. The rules of play are internalized and transmitted through repetition and practice which in turn becomes the inner structure of the play itself. The play space expands beyond its limited existence in time and space to form a self organizing community with tradition of its own:

A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over.... The feeling of being “apart together” is an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game. (1950, p.12)

Building on Huizinga’s concept of “the closed world of play,” Gadamer (1992), contends that the *spielraum* (play space) is a bounded space created from within, by the nature and the structure of the game and by the conducts of the players themselves who are responsible for ordering and shaping the fate of the game. The players join the game by choice and by sheer desire to play, imposing on themselves rule of conducts and constraints they vowed to observe in order to continue to play. The player is drawn to and kept captive by the game itself, in what Gadamer describes as the acknowledgement of “the primacy of play over the consciousness of the player” (p.104).

From a biological perspective, the making of a play space can be equated to the autopoietic (self-making) process of a living system. The term “autopoiesis” refers to a mechanism whereby a living organism, whether physical, mental, or social, becomes a self-organized, autonomous system by specifying its own laws of existence (Maturana and Varela, 1987). As Maturana and Varela puts it,

The organization of an autopoietic system is such that their only product is themselves, with no separation between producer and the product. The being and doing of an autopoietic unity are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization (p.49).

The ludic space is similar to an autopoietic system. Players define the rules of the game which in turn serve as the structure of the game as well as the boundary of the space. The rules of the game are absolutely binding without which the autopoietic unity of the play space is corrupted and ceases to exist. As Nachmanovitch (1990) puts it, “free play is a self organizing system, questioning and answering itself about its own identity” (p.102).

From an anthropological perspective, the play space is defined as a liminal zone (Turner, 1974), a sacred transitional phase observed in the primitive societies, where cultural and communal practices takes place free from the normative social structure. Within liminal space and time, tribal members are granted temporary freedom to explore the ludic, sacred, and profane in the forms of rituals and myths. As Turner puts it, “in liminality people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements.”(p. 60).

In psychological terms, play happens within the safety of a transitional space, where a child can explore and express herself unchallenged by the pressure of defining an inner our outer reality. These early experiences that intensely shape the child’s life, manifest themselves throughout adulthood in the forms of art, religion and creative scientific work (Winnicott, 1971). Similarly, Moustakas (1997) contends that the most essential element in play therapy is the safe play space, bounded by the therapist’s consistency, firmness, courage, and love.

Among many forms of animal play identified by ethologists, the particular play form of a great interest to us is social play, one of the play behaviors through which

animals send “play-signal,” a message exchanged among animals to communicate a desire to create a play space where they can freely engage in play and not in an aggressive fight. Most mammals have identifiable visual, auditory, tactile or olfactory signals that serve to initiate or maintain social play or denote that “what follows is play” (Fagen, 1981).

The best-known play signal is “play-face” shared by many species as a way to initiate play. A typical example of mammalian play-face can be seen in open mouth display in kittens when they are ready to play (Fagen, 1981). Certain motor patterns, such as the half-crouch and pounce, are frequently used to initiate social play bouts, while other patterns, such as chases or horizontal leaps, are often used to terminate social play (West, 1974). When this special language is communicated, animals engage in several interactive play behaviors such as “play-fighting.” During “play-fight” animals exhibit some degree of reciprocity in their roles, so that a given animal “dominates” roughly as much as he is “dominated.” A behavior identified as “self-handicapping” may occur, so that a larger animal “submits” to a smaller, weaker partner (Hole and Einon, 1984). Play signals are usually clear, unambiguous, powerful, and capable of crossing species lines (Brown, 1995).

Play space provides a safe environment within which animals creates a mutual belief system that serves as the basis of trusting socialization in animals; it provides a safe training ground for those skills needed later in adult life, and also serves as a medium for the nurturance of innovative performances that may become integrated into the social traditions of a group (Bekoff and Allen, 1992; Brown, 1995; Goodall, 1995; Hole and Einon, 1984).

## **THE FREE PLAY SOFTBALL LEAGUE**

Is it possible to create a space where anybody can come and play, free from the constraints of social and professional demands? Playfulness does not cease with childhood; it continues throughout adult lives. Such an assertion may be true, however for many, the spontaneity and openness experienced as a child have taken a back seat in adult years. Unlike children who can turn almost anything into a playground and animals who can create a play space by simply exchanging play signals; as Erikson once said the playing adult needs to step sideward into another reality in order to rediscover play (p.194-195). Similarly, Dewey (1990) says the adult can play only after being free from the economic pressure and the fixed demands of the adult responsibilities. We are skilled at “playing” social and professional roles, which ironically, discourage us to play. The social conventions imposed on adult life block our ability to exchange human play signals and create a shared understanding that is “OK to play.”

The following case study illustrates how a pick up softball league came to life and evolved into a ludic learning space where anybody can join. An instrumental case study (Stake, 1998; Creswell, 1998) was chosen as the method of inquiry to illustrate how the play concepts manifest themselves in the softball league and to gain insights, deeper understanding and refinement of the proposed play theories. The case will begin with a brief historical description of the league, followed by a holistic analysis (Yin, 1989) of the play space using the key play elements as interpretative framework. The data for the study was obtained from multiple sources. First, we conducted personal interviews ranging from forty five minutes to several hours with current players of the game as well as the past members of the league. The interviews were conducted over the phone,

through face-to-face conversation on the sideline of the softball field before or after the game, and through off-site interviews conducted elsewhere. Second, reflection notes were submitted by a few members of the league via e-mails. Third, ethnographic field notes were provided by two of the members of the league. Finally, as players, we provide our personal experiences of the game.

### **History of the League.**

In the mid 1970's, Case Western Reserve University organized intramural softball leagues from different departments and fraternity groups which have been competing ever since on a regular basis. The Organizational Behavior Department organized its own team made up of faculty, staff, students and family members. Overtime, the games became increasingly competitive and aggressive, and the OB team, which was much more inclusive when it came to its member composition (composed of men, women, and physically handicapped individuals with varying skill levels) found itself at disadvantage playing against highly skilled, competitive, intramural teams.

Born out of this experience was the desire to create a league independent from the competitive intramural league, where anyone would come together to play just for the fun of the game. David, one of the founders of the game, remembers his motivation to start a different kind of league because "softball was too much fun to be left only to those who could play well." In essence, those words summarized the vision for the pick up softball game and so the league was born in 1991. The league met every Sunday morning from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm at the baseball field of the University campus. The season began on the first Sunday after tax day in April and ended at the first snow in November.

David provided the softball equipment and took it on himself to haul the balls, bats, gloves and bases and set up the field every Sunday morning. In the early years the term “league” may have been a bit grandiose for the game. The participation was random and sparse, not enough to make up two teams. Regardless of who or how many showed up, members played catch, hit balls, practiced fielding. Those for whom softball was a new experience learned the rules of the game as they played along. There was no designated coach or manager, or team captain for that matter; those who knew how to play helped those who were new to the game. As membership grew, and the converts regularly showed up, two teams were made up, sometimes five on each side, other times seven. Only after several years was the full complement of ten players on a side reached, and then only occasionally in the middle of the summer.

In 1995, the University decided to build a new convention center in the existing baseball field and the league needed a new space for the game. A softball field located fifteen minutes away from the University campus within a neighborhood park was chosen. Following the move to the new field membership began to grow not only in its size, but also in its diversity by gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economical background, and softball skill level. What had started out as a fairly homogeneous population of OB faculty, students, families and friends, began increasingly attracting local residents who found out about the game from different people and sources. Over time, new players joined from other counties, some of them taking a forty five minute bus ride to the ball field. Guided by the league’s founding vision, “fun softball for all,” everyone was welcome. In the fifteenth year of its existence, the league adopted “Free Play Softball

League” as its official name, celebrating the special occasion with anniversary shirts and hats.

### **The Free Play diamond**

The Free Play ball field was in a grass park next to the city baseball fields. Unlike the impeccably manicured city league fields, the Free Play field was poorly maintained with no score board, lights or dugouts. The home plate area was particularly a mess, with weeds growing behind the base and the deep indentations in the batter’s box. The backstop was old and torn at the bottom. When it rained the night before, it was almost certain that the home plate area had turned into a pond. David, known as the equipment manager, always carried a shovel in the back of his car trunk and would make several trips to the playground to carry the sand back to the field to patch the holes on the ground. Frank, one of the veteran players, often would come to the field on Saturdays to patch the field and have it ready for the Sunday game. In spite of the poor condition of the grounds, the league never approached the field manager to ask for a better care of the field. From early on, the league decided to prevent the city bureaucracy to encroach on the game and even bypassed the routine procedure of reserving the field every Sunday. It was almost as if the Free Play league existed in the shadow of the city league, unnoticed by the city, or by the neighborhood community. The “league up on the hill,” as the Free Play members used to call the city league, was a highly competitive e softball league, with die hard aggressive players pushing each other to their limits to win the game. As Lebron would say, pointing to the city fields, “over there, you get out there every single

time to kick ass and beat the other. It is not like our league.” In the Free Play league, we played a different kind of game.

*Play is free - Come to play if you like.* Since the league was spontaneously founded by like minded people who came together to play ball every Sunday morning, the same spirit was carried over to the formation and organization of the game. People received friendly invitations to join the game but were never coerced into it. The intrinsic love of softball and the desire to play was what made the game fun. Ultimately the voluntarily commitment of the players was the key to the sustenance and survival of the league. Helen, one of the founding members of the league, remembers how the league functioned in the early years:

We just showed up to play. David had the equipment and we just reached in to the bags, grabbed the gloves and bats and played. David pitched, and we did the batting. There was nobody to tell what to do; it was more like show than tell. Occasionally Dave will coach us, “Try to hold the bat this way;” but there was no real teaching going on. It was about keeping your eyes on the ball. Sometimes we had ten people, other times we had three. The game was never about keeping scores. It was about playing. The emphasis was never on comparing to one another. We did not have any particular role, we did not have excuses to be this way or that way. We did not have to live in our heads. Dave was the key in creating a safe space that supported people to play on their own terms and not to meet the expectation of others.

For David who was eager to sustain the league, it was hard not to recruit people to come to play, at least in the earlier years:

I remember begging Annabelle to come to play. I knew she was uneasy about playing softball, but I could not play softball alone. If I did not recruit her and others around me, I would be sitting alone in the ball field with my glove and bat until my hair turned gray. I realized later that asking people to come to play was counter to the idea of voluntary participation of the game. Since then, I learned to extend invitation to people only in a minimalist way.

The temptation to enlist people to join the league would resurface from time to time. In the later years, some players suggested to keep a membership roster to call the players during the week reminding them to show up for Sunday game. The idea was eventually discarded, since it would violate the free will participation of the players. Over time, the voluntary participation became one of the attractive features for those who considered joining the league. Erica, who recently moved to Cleveland from California along with her husband and two children, explained why they decided to come and play: “I heard we could show up if we like and quit coming if we choose to.” Her entire family joined the league and has rarely missed the game ever since.

**Chaotic fun - Playing with the uncertainty** The voluntary nature of the game posed a few challenges to the league’s functioning that required ingenuity and flexibility. Kim Park, who was one of the pioneering members of the league, describes how in every single game there was always an element of surprise:

The game was chaotic and disorganized. It was a fun chaos, which made attractive to join. You never knew who would show up. I don’t think the game would have been attractive if it was completely organized like a professional sport team. Because you never knew what you would get every week, you needed to be spontaneous and ready to improvise. If there was no short stop, I would go and play short stop. If there was no outfielder I would go and fill that position. Everybody played the position that needed to be filled at that time. That added variety to the game. Because of the unpredictability of the game, it all came down to relationship. For me, it was more about meeting people I like in a different setting and strengthening that relationship.

Joe, a die hard Free Play member who takes a forty five minute bus drive to get to the ball field, echoes Kim Park’s earlier experience of the game:

Every Sunday I get off the bus, I walk up the hill and the minute I can see the ball field I start counting how many people are there on the field: six, eight, or maybe

ten. You will never know how many will show up. Take last week for example. It was raining and yet twenty people showed up. Today, gosh! What a gorgeous day and we had only twelve. I will break my neck not to show up on a day like this. I think to myself, “What is the matter with people.” But, this is the nature of our game.

The unpredictable and random participation of the players became a norm of the game. There were those who would regularly show up a half an hour earlier for practice , others would show up right at the beginning of the game. The challenging ones were the perpetual late comers, who would show up half way through the game messing up the line ups, not to mention the arrival of newcomers who would often pull in the parking lot with the entire family. This would pose a challenge to Steve, the handicapper of the team who makes the line-ups every game. Steve’s reflection on this matter illustrates how uncertainty is an ever present variable that needs to be taken into account in the make up of the team:

As my car slides into a parking slot, I scan the playing field to see that the ‘object masters’ have arrived and prepared the ritual playing space. The chairs are unfolded, the orange cones are in place, the bats are propped up against the fence, the bag of balls sits to the left of the pitcher’s rubber. As I walk to the field I count the players and assess whether the number is hopeful or challenging. I consider whether I will be afforded a few swings of the bat or whether I will soon have to fill out the line-ups. I follow up certain rules of thumb in my odds-making role, yet one of those rules of thumb is to formulate line-ups firstly as a matter of guessing about who showed up, when. ( Calhoun 2007 Ethnographic field note)

Regardless of their play habits, nobody was denied participation, including the bystanders who often would jump in the game upon invitation.

Patrick speaks of the inclusive nature of the game:

I like the fact that anybody can come and play. I like that kids can play also. I remember when Glen used to come from time to time. We all knew that he was mentally handicapped but nobody talked about it and he was welcome to play.

Take me for example. I am always late. But nobody says I cannot play because I will mess up the game.

The circle of players began to grow as friends and family members of the regulars joined the game. “Who is the fellow in blue T-shirt?” “He is Jack’s poker game buddy.” “Who is the kid in red shorts?” “He is Victoria’s son.” Such exchange became a common occurrence in the field.

*Autopoietic play boundaries – the rules of the game.* The unique character of the league required some modification of the official rules of slow pitch softball. These rules emerged through trial and error; being truthful to the spirit of the game as it was originally envisioned and maintaining the internal structure and integrity of the game as a whole. Without such balance, the game would have collapsed into a chaos and ultimately the play space would have been destroyed from within.

*Allegiance to the league, not to the team.* In a conventional league players primary loyalty and membership lies with the team. The Free Play league functioned somewhat differently. A decision was made to deemphasize the loyalty to the individual team and promote the allegiance to the league as a whole. Given the diversity of the team composition, it was almost impossible to create two permanent teams with equally balanced skills and talents. Instead, players were assigned to a different team every game in an effort to create two equally skilled teams. This produced the added benefit that each game was a closely contested event.

There were times where the team composition reached above ten on each side, crowding the field as well as creating a long line of batters waiting for their turn. Other times, there were less than six on each side. On those occasions only half of the field was

used and the pitcher served as the first baseman as well. Another element of a serious concern was the safety of the players. For example, whenever children showed up to play, their safety naturally became a concern, and the entire league needed to be on the lookout for the children. Older players need special attention, as well as the physically handicapped and the injured ones who were provided a designated runner.

Joe, who also plays competitively in the city league up on the hill, expresses his concern for the safety of his teammates:

In the city league I can play full steam. Here, it doesn't matter which team you are playing with. Because of the uneven skill level, I have to be careful so that I don't hurt other people. I have to be careful not to hit the pitcher; I need to be protective of the kids when they show up to play.

Marcy describes the spirit of the league as follows:

I don't come to compete for the team. I come for friendship, sharing of experience. You will never be on the same team next time anyway, so who cares about "my" team. I come to see Keith, I come to see Melinda, or Lebron.

*No umpire.* In the early years there was no need for an umpire since nobody cared much about the right calls or the scores. As the league became more organized and the players overall skill level began to improve, an accurate call and the final scores began to matter. Disputes over the fairness of each call began to surface in the games. Aside from each player being naturally biased toward one's own team, the fierceness of the dispute stemmed from the different positions that players were viewing the play. A line drive was definitely a foul ball from a catcher's view standing on home plate, whereas for a second baseman it was a perfect fair ball. In spite of these disagreements, players resisted the idea of hiring an outside referee and came up with an alternative method to resolve the disputes.

The rule everyone agreed upon was to defer the judgment to the player who was in the most favorable position to make the call and discouraging the players involved in the play to make the call. The calls were not always accurate, and the arbitrary nature of the calls made few players very uncomfortable.

Gerald, a very competitive player, hit the ball and ran to the first base. The short stop threw the ball to the first baseman and Gerald was called out. The second baseman and the third baseman made the call. Gerald disagreed with the call, and vigorously argued against the decision. The defense team stood by their judgment and did not give in to his complaints. Frustrated by the whole situation, Gerald stormed out of the game yelling at his fellow playmates:

“You are bunch of @\$%^&!”

Gerald never came back to the game again.

Later on, it was decided that if agreement could no be reached, the catcher would have the final word to settle the dispute. However, the catcher’s calls were also challenged from different positions in the field. Luke recounts a recent game where he was the catcher:

I remember one game, I was the catcher and the runner came running into the home base. I caught the ball from the third baseman and I tagged the runner. He was out for sure. But Jake, who was playing short stop, insisted he was safe. So it goes.

Luke still thinks that having no umpire is one of the best features of the game. In his usual soft spoken manner he says,

“You just need to pay more attention to what is going on.”

*No strike-outs.* One of the challenges the league faced from early on, was the players’ wide range of softball skills. For some this was their first time experience in the

field while others had played all their lives. Some players were fast learners, while others took longer to master the skills. To balance out the discrepancy of the game outcomes, “no strike-outs” rule was instituted to ensure everybody had a chance to get a hit and step on the base, as long as they persevered. Sometimes this produced a frustrating and embarrassing situation when a batter swung over and over, challenging everyone’s patience and the batter’s persistence.

*Seven runs per inning maximum.* This ground rule dictates that when offensive team scores seven runs, the inning would automatically be over. This helps avoid lopsided game outcomes and keeps competitiveness in check.

*Celebrating foolishness.* Since the players’ skill levels varied enormously, it was particularly important to set a positive tone to encourage players to develop softball skills and discover the love for the game without the fear of external judgment or self induced criticism. As Nachmanovitch (1990) asserts, the “fear of appearing foolish” to others, blocks our ability to be a “fool,” a necessary state of mind where we are able to fully engage in play. Annabelle, who always felt she lacked athletic skills, reluctantly joined the game in 1991:

I first resisted participating because I am such a poor athlete. I didn't want to be embarrassed or to make "my team" lose. I did go out because of Dave's enthusiasm and the reassurances of the participants that skill did not matter. I remember being on the field in the sunshine, and it felt so good to be outside with friends doing something physical. One of my most striking memories of the first time I played is of missing a catch that almost anyone else would have gotten. Everyone laughed along with me in such an accepting and playful way. I didn't feel put down or laughed at in the least. That experience, and many others that were similar, allowed me to let go of needing to look good or perform well. I could just run and laugh and play with my friends - not a common experience in the rest of my life.

Melinda, a forty five years old film maker who joined the league in 1998, described her experience in the league as follows:

I never anticipated that a softball game would change my life – but it has. Three years ago, my worldview shifted when I started playing softball every Sunday. At first tentative about my athletic skills, I was shocked at how comfortable everyone made me feel about abilities or lack of them. There was absolutely no judgment. I jokingly called it the “sheltered workshop of play.” Even if I stopped the ball with my head, someone would say – “nice stop” without an ounce of sarcasm. This game, in a big way, has taught me that it’s okay to make mistakes. The greatest tragedy is when we fearfully give up trying and limit our possibilities. Our culture does not allow you to play on anything that you are not good at, even if you enjoy it. I am pleased to reach a place where I can feel comfortable with being very bad at something. As adults, we are taught to work with our strengths. It is “playing” and working with my weaknesses that has given me the greatest strength.

While Annabelle and Melinda’s experience illustrates the supportive and positive atmosphere of the space, from time to time external criticism and judgment would erupt during the game. This was particularly the case when a novice player or less athletically inclined players joined the league. From the vantage point of a skilled player, a beginner who needed to swing the bat twenty times before getting a hit, or a slow runner who would repeatedly drop the ball in the outfield was difficult to endure. Manuel was one of those skilled players who also played in the competitive league. Steve recalls an incident that happened one Sunday morning when Melinda was up to bat, and she was not having much luck in getting a hit. Manuel, who was a catcher, began teasing her and there was no sign that he would stop. Steve, who was observing this scene, was quick in handling the situation:

At one point, the teasing started to get too excessive. I came up to him discretely and said: “That doesn’t help her.” He never did that again.

Alice recalls a similar situation when Joe's ten years old nephew, Manny was up to bat. Manny was a very introverted child, a novice in the baseball. He started swinging the bat and had no luck in having a hit:

When a novice like Manny comes up to bat, I am aware of two things I need to pay attention to. The first one is to make sure he does not feel embarrassed if starts swinging and missing the balls. I need to control my pitches and try to throw the ball almost aiming at his bat. The second thing I pay attention to is how my team is reacting around me. For the most part, people are good at exercising patience and wait until the batter gets a hit. That particular day, Joe, Manny's uncle, was playing short stop and was getting impatient and irritated. He started yelling at Manny, giving him loud advice. Obviously his screaming and yelling was distracting Manny. At one point, I turned around and said to Joe: "Give him a break. He is trying." I continued to pitch to Manny telling him to relax and that it was OK to try until he got a hit.

Over the years, this kind of intervention became rare on the field. Public coaching went on, but in a non-judgmental and non-obtrusive way. If someone needed extra help, the veteran players would pull them to the sideline and coach them on the skills they needed to develop.

While someone like Melinda, who was able to "publicly out herself" and ignore the internal as well as external criticism, for others, shutting down the inner critic in particular, was not an easy thing to do. Dave comments on his tendency to let the inner critic take the best of him:

When I made a bone head play, I used to beat myself up for a whole week replaying the scenario over and over again in my head. Now I am getting better. I can get over it in a day or two. I realized that I was saying to myself, "you are not good," instead of concentrating on the specifics of what I was doing wrong and trying to learn from it. When people come up to me and say, "hey, no big deal," or "you will get it next time," it helped me get over it.

*It's play time – stepping out of the real life.* Sunday morning from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm was a special time when players would leave their "real life" behind and enter

the world of the softball game. Regardless of the role you played in real life, a therapist, a forest ranger, a nurse, unemployed, or a college professor, this was a time to play ball. Everybody addressed to one another by the first name, and nobody bothered to ask each other's last names. If there were two Tracies, they were addressed as "Tracy I" or "Tracy II," or "Old Brad" and "Young Brad." In fact, the league did not adopt an official name until its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Melinda used to call the league "a team with no name":

Every Sunday we meet to get our play fix. There's no drama or social pressure. It's our Sunday ritual – a space for a different kind of communion. NO "appointed" coaches, NO membership fees, NO team name or use of last names, NO pressure to show up and NO tryouts. Nobody cares what you do during the week. In fact, most of us know very little about each other's personal lives – basically, we come to play.

Lebron, who has been coming to the game for ten years, would not mind playing the game twice a week. One of the best features of the game for him is that he does not have to deal with "every day Joes and Jennies." The game is relaxing and he feels unburdened socially and professionally. Keith, one of the veteran players, says the Sunday game is the most fun he gets all week long:

When I come to play softball I don't think about anything I worry during the week. I think other people feel the same way too. You don't have to worry about boyfriend, girl friend, or 401K. I just play.

As Toby would say, "I only need to show up"; the freedom to come to the game on one's own terms, unencumbered by any social pressure to "coordinate with anybody, or pick somebody," motivates him to continue to play. Similarly, for Marcy, who used to play competitive softball for many years, Sunday game is her own sacred time:

Here I can leave the fragment of my ego behind. I don't have to be ashamed because of my bad performance. I don't have to be concerned because I have let down my team. You play on your own terms. Some day I come to develop some skills; other times I just come to scream, yell, and jump up and down. Some day I

come to laugh my ass off, and next Sunday I may be there to improve my running. Each Sunday, I come for different reasons depending on what I feel like doing.

*Playing with the tension of Agon and paidia.* Competition is at the heart of any organized sport or game. While it is possible to engage in baseball with playfulness and fun, the intense rivalry between two teams can drive fun out of the game. While *agon* (competition) and *paidia* (fun) would ideally coexist in the game, often the balance tips toward aggressive pursuit of the final victory. As Marcy would say, in a competitive game, “fun and pleasure come only when you win.”

In the Free Play game, *agon* and *paidia* needed to coexist in equal balance if it was to survive as an inclusive league, since players joined the league for a variety of motives and reasons. There were those who were good athletes who got simply tired of playing in highly competitive baseball leagues; others joined the game because they felt they were not “athletic enough” or “good enough” to play in any competitive league regardless of their love for the game. Several players joined the game just for the exercise and fun, while there were few who loved the thrill of the competition but also enjoyed the camaraderie and friendship the league offered. With such diverse and conflicting forces operating in the game, the tenuous balance between competition and fun was a challenging dynamic to achieve and maintain. The game had a tendency to tilt toward competition and rivalry as players would get caught in arguments and disputes over plays or get frustrated at their teammates poor performance. Through trial and error players gradually have learned how to live with the tension and keep competition and fun in balance.

Joe was one of those competitive players who also played in the city league on the hill. Over the years, he learned how to curb his competitive streak and adjust his play behavior to fit the culture of the game. In the early years, he routinely yelled, criticized, and screamed at anybody who made a bad play. His temper particularly got out of control when his family members did not perform up to his standard.

One Sunday morning, Terrence, his nephew, who was the second baseman, missed a ball and allowed the runner to steal the second base. Uncle Joe screamed in anger and threw his three hundred pound body on the ground and proceeded to pound and kick the dirt in a rare display of temper tantrum. The game came to a brief halt, everybody with the look of disbelief in their faces, not knowing what to make of his behavior.

Bernice, his sister-in-law, normally a very quiet woman, yelled from her bench on the sideline with her gruff and strong voice:

“Hey Joe, it is time for your medication!”

The entire field burst into laughter. After a while, everybody regrouped themselves and the game went on. Joe slowly got up and returned to his position.

Joe, reflects back on his past years, and sees the game in a new light:

I like the fact that the game here is not competitive and I enjoy the company of you all. I don't have to worry about being on time and it is relaxing. I am a good ball player and I have been playing for thirty nine years. Here, I learned to control my competitiveness. I am a very competitive guy and I had an attitude problem toward others. I expected everybody to put hundred percent into the game and I used to get frustrated when it didn't happen. I came to realize that I was coming to play because I wanted to compete but others where coming for exercise and fun. I think I matured a lot and my attitude toward others changed. I still enjoy the competitive game and for that, I go to the city league to play.

There were another group of players, “the recovering agon addicts,” who, before they joined the free play league, were hooked to the fierce competitiveness of the game.

Moses was one of them, who now focuses on “competing with himself and not with others:”

When guys compete with one another, it gets you into a path where there is no turning back. You just turn into bunch of animals. Being there myself before, I can attest to that. When you are excessively competitive, that means there are some areas in your life that is lacking. This game tells me the area of my life in general that I need to work on. The game helps me stay balanced mentally and physically.

Marcy always loved softball and has been a member of a competitive softball league in the past. At some point, aggressive competition began to wear off:

I was very competitive but not pleasantly so. It was pleasant when you won. It was corrosive when you didn't. We used to go to a bar after the game, get five beers and torture ourselves to come up with all kinds of reasons why we lost.

A total lack of competition would also have spoiled the game. As Patrick would say,

We have the right dose of competitiveness and fun in the game. If people are goofing off, not taking it seriously, I don't think it would be fun. It is true that there is a wide range of skill level here, but I think everybody is pretty serious. Take Eon for example. He is only ten years old, and everybody knows that it is challenging for him to play with adults. We all welcome him to play. But once he is in the game, nobody gives him a break. We don't say, “Oh, he is so young. Let him get on base. When he is out, he is out, period. I think it is good for his character building.

Alice was one of those players who has never been a competitive type, but joined the game for the fun and camaraderie of the game. Softball skill development has never been her strongest suit, but that quickly changed when she began learning how to pitch. Damon describes her early years' struggle in pitcher's mound:

Alice began taking over the role of pitcher from Dave at one time. Although she was in training, no one let up on their intensity when batting. Sure, she was one of the tiniest players on the field, but no one was going to give her any breaks. If she wanted to be a pitcher, she had to prove herself on her own terms.

Harry, who always loved sports, feels there are very few outlets available to compete in good spirit and still being able to have fun:

What I enjoy about our game is that you compete, you play hard, but if you make mistakes, it is OK. It is a very forgiving game. There are some competitive guys in the game. But when that happens, I just laugh at them and send them a message: "Hey, it is just a game."

***Play Signals.*** As Toby would say "there are no rules, only guidelines" in the game. The game takes its own natural course, nobody is told what to do or how to behave. A special kind of play signal emerged in the game. Play signals were transmitted by observation and mimicry and operated in many levels in the game. For example, how are newcomers socialized into the game in the absence of any sort of initiation rituals? Steve describes how the new players pick up on the nature of the game through exchange of play signals:

There are many sub-spaces that constitute the overall play space of the game. New players are invited, greeted, welcomed. One of the subspaces is the sideline where greetings are easily exchanged along with first names. The sideline is an important feature before, during and after the game. Certain protocols are observable before the game. The new comer is not told what to do but must pick up the pre-game flow. The new comer can run out to any position not already occupied. They can take practice swings upon asserting their place on the deck. In the field newcomers are exposed to the supportive and forgiving nature of the game which includes good natured ribbing and chatter. The positive and carefree ambience of the game seems to be critical to the process of accommodation. Newcomers observe the scoring patterns, negotiations about foul line calls, and the different dispositions of the players. I suspect the socialization processes are very much ordered and assimilated subconsciously, as a matter of developing a feel rather than searching out and rehearsing concrete features (Calhoun 2007, Ethnographic field note).

On another level, there is a play signal that regulates the tension between *agon* and *paidia* in the game. The disposition and temperament of each player, whether it tips toward the extreme end of competition or fun, is a determinant factor whether a player would stay in the game or eventually decides to leave. As Patrick would say, “those who have too strong of a streak of competitiveness will eventually be weeded out of the game, unless they adjust their attitude.” Every time someone would go on the deeper end of competitiveness, voices would erupt from the field playfully teasing the player to “ease off” on their aggressive streak. As Steve observed, “in this game, aggression is never countered with aggression; it is always countered with humor.”

***Recursiveness.*** “Every year, in the last game of the season, I look around the field and say to myself, some of us will not be here next year. We don’t even know what is going to happen next week. So why not give it all when I am here.” On one level, Joe’s reflection is a reminder of the fragility and finitude of the play space. The game emerges and vanishes every Sunday morning, with no guarantee or certainty that it will be there the following week. Yet, the game has managed to re-emerge week after week, season after season, for sixteen years in a surprising display of resilience and perseverance. The replication of the space occurs at different levels. Steve sees the dynamics behind the intergenerational replication of the space:

The space survives through the persistence of a core group of veterans who show up to play and replicate the quality of the game season after season. They are willing to work and play together to survive the uncertainties inherent in the ecology of the game. At some point, an intergenerational replication of the game begins, as the newcomers arrive and learn the ways of the game.

At a micro level, the remaking of the space occurs on a weekly basis through activities and chores necessary to the game. For example, since the field needs to be prepared for the game every Sunday, Dave, the equipment manager, and Alice arrive half an hour earlier to set up the field. Dave feels there is almost a sense of sacredness in the act of preparing the game field:

Every Sunday morning, I feel a sense of responsibility for the game. When I come to the field, I can't help but play in my mind a few possible scenarios that may happen that morning. What if some another sport team had the field reserved in advance? Where should we move the game? On a different level, I also feel a sense of magic in setting up the field for the game. You put the bases around, haul the bats, balls, and gloves, and lo and behold, people show up to play.

*Play community.* “There is a bridge between friendship and play if you are willing to cross that bridge.” Frank speaks about the nature of the game in a rare emotional tone. Despite the informal, ad-hoc nature of the game, there is a sense of shared solidarity among the players that flows out of the game. In Steve's words:

Once the game commences, the play is the thing. The game allows for a wide range of disposition of personality and expressions of emotions, while at same time, it elevates cooperation, sense of community, and shared experience.

There is a unanimous agreement among the players that the sense of community they experience in the game is one of the main reasons why they come to play. When asked why he comes to play, Joe, one of the most competitive players in the game, offered a plain and simple answer:

“Because of you all... you are my family.”

Harry says, “this is the kind of community I always wanted to be in. They are all nice people I want to have around me all the time.” For Toby and LeBron, the most important aspect of the game is the “nice mix” of people. “There are whites, African

Americans, Asian, men, women, and kids. It is not “all whites game.” They are all interesting and good people.”

Frank speaks of the sense of shared responsibility and commitment to one another that exists in the league:

Many times, I look around the field, I stand back and just take in... the green field, the children, ladies and men, all colors and age. I think people here are very caring and loving. When someone gets hurt, the game comes to a halt and everybody is there to help. Kenny is very good at that. He is always ready to check on people who are hurting and make the pain more tolerable. When Stan broke his nose, it was the same thing. I was so concerned because there was so much blood on his face. Marcy was great. She took care of him and Jake drove him to the hospital. This is real love. People here are my family.

What explains the shared sense of community that binds the players together?

How a group of strangers with no formal organization and purpose managed to develop a strong bond and stayed together for more than a decade? An explanation to these questions may be found in the nature of play itself. The temporary suspension of the reality that is fully acknowledged in the play space invites individuals to “play for real” in the game. Stripped off from real life roles, players stand naked in play, expressing wide range of emotions and behaviors for all to see. The unique dispositions and personalities of the players are openly exposed in the space in the various forms of spontaneous display of joy, anger, selfishness, generosity and courage. The true self that emerges through play evokes an ontological nature of human frailty as well as the limitless possibility for growth and self-discovery. The shared understanding and acceptance of their own vulnerabilities and strengths, may be what binds them together as play-community.

## **PLAY AND LEARNING**

Huizinga (1950) notes that play is about stepping out of common reality into a “higher order”, where one can imagine oneself as someone different, more beautiful, courageous, and daring. One “represents” oneself in the game as “the great hitter,” or “fast runner.” The power of play is about the symbolic “representation” of self as the embodiment and actualization of what one has imagined oneself to be and become. Our case study suggests that this self actualization extends beyond the development of softball skills; it extends into the arena of personal growth and development whereby some players come to grips with their inability to control anger or extreme competitiveness, while others experience awakening toward becoming more compassionate and accepting of others. The play space seems to foster intellectual, physical, moral, or spiritual values in the players, elevating play into one of the highest forms of human learning as described by Kolb (1984).

### **Competitiveness versus fair play**

In the heat of the game, players tend to become over concerned with winning, pushing their aggressive agenda to the point where they lose sight of the spirit of the game and concerns for others players. Jake, a veteran player, represents the voices of those who learned to curb their aggressive behavior in the game:

I learned to temper my competitiveness. In the past, there were several players, myself included, who used to have an angry edge. The game has gotten better. It has a much better spirit now.

It seems as if the play boundaries begin to close in when the competitiveness gets out of hand, sending play signals to the players in an attempt to restore order in the play space. As Huizinga notes, play puts to the test the player's ethical values of courage, resilience, and most importantly, "fairness". (1950 p.11)

### **Self absorption versus empathy**

The desire to hit a home run or catch the fly ball keeps players focused and absorbed in the game. However, the play principles that permeate the Free Play league, force players to keep their egos in check and shift their attention to the larger ecology of the game. Damon reflects on a particular instance where he was up to bat, and is confronted with the dilemma of risking the pitcher's safety at the expense of the thrill of hitting a solid single:

I prided myself on a nice little hit that, if executed properly, would pop the ball right over pitcher's head, over second base, and would land in center field, just out of reach of any fielder. The result was an easy single. The problem lied in the fact that the execution of this play rested largely on luck, not skill. Although in theory, and sometimes in practice, the ball would follow a nice arc over the pitcher's head, it was just as likely that the ball would go flying across the infield and hit the pitcher right in the head. I had this consistent way of hitting the ball right up the center, but that the ball had inconsistent height and might just as easily fling back at her off my bat as quickly as it had left her glove. I can't even remember my action. Did I try this technique despite its potential hazards? Perhaps there is some lesson about trade-offs between play and the value of keeping our egos in check during play. Perhaps the lesson is about the costs of risking the safety of others for our own thrills. Perhaps the lesson is about protecting those we love from even small harms.

In their own unique ways, several players echoed Damon's empathic stance toward other players in the game. For some, it was about "becoming more understanding and accepting" of limitations of less skilled players. For others, it was about developing

ability to adjust one's agenda to "whatever people want to do in the game and still have fun."

### **Forgiving oneself**

Although players would unanimously acknowledge the forgiving nature of the game, for many, being forgiving toward oneself did not come by very easily. Some players, despite their superior softball skills, would not show up to play for several weeks after a bone head mistake they have made in the game. Dale was one such superior player:

One Sunday, I dropped the ball in the outfield. That was such a humiliating experience that I did not want to come back to play again.

Eventually Dale overcame his sense of embarrassment and decided to come back. Kim Park, who found himself in Dale's situation in the early years, learned to become more accepting of his limitations and inadequacies:

I learned not to take things seriously. It is not all about winning, or come down hard on myself if you don't do well. Be in the moment, enjoy and appreciate the setting you are, with people you care.

### **Experiencing the authentic self**

The element of repetition not only is one of the essential qualities of play but also holds the inner structure of the play space itself (Huizinga, 1950). In the Free Play league, the recursive nature of the play activities, not only sustains the structure and flow of the game, but also has profound impact on players inner lives as they recursively come back to confront their "true selves" in the process. When players joined the league for the first

time, it is natural for them to wear a “game face,” rarely revealing their personal sides during the game. Overtime, players gradually began to peel off their game faces and freely express their authentic selves.

Melinda described her sense of freedom as she rediscovered her authenticity through play. Eventually, her play experience expands into other areas of her life:

I lost my embarrassment and began trying all kinds of things I was not particularly good at. I tried roller blade and now I am taking up on singing. I was able to publicly out myself. Lebron used to laugh at me every game: “Melinda, you really suck.” I could care less. I remember my last game before I moved out of state. Lebron came to me and said: “Melinda, you suck less.” We laughed together. This was his way of congratulating me for my improvement.

Lebron’s humorous and witty side would take a while to come out in the game. He described in his usual gruff voice, his distant and detached behavior toward others in the early years:

I am a very reserved guy. I don’t let people get into my personal life. Even at work, it is very rare for people to get to know me. Here it is different. I like the people here.

## **SUMMARY**

What lessons can be learned from this case study of a ludic learning space? Would it be possible to replicate the higher order learning achieved through play in a formal educational environment? Dewey (1997) contends that the sharp distinction between play and work, a view held by many educators, leads to a false dichotomy of play as free and arbitrary activity one engages for its own sake, while work is associated with activities with utility and a clear outcome. A truly educative experience sees no distinction between utility and fun; the learner is drawn to the activity for its own sake and for the meaningful learning outcome one achieves through the engagement in such an

experience. For Dewey, *playfulness* is an expression of an engaged mind. A playful mind does not see separation between the process and the outcome; it sees learning as a unified experience.

Contrary to Dewey's view of education, the false and distorted separation between the epistemic and the ludic, *agon* and *paidia*, the process and the product continue to encroach most of our formal educational environments (Elkind, 1988; Gatto 1992; Hannaford, 1995; Healey 1990; Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). The case study suggests that the making of the softball learning space followed an autopoietic process whereby overtime, the utility and fun became a unified learning experience for all. The higher order learning was promoted within such a holistic learning space, where individual members set their own learning agenda without compromising the integrity of the space. Three pivotal learning principles accounted for the creation of the ludic learning space:

*Inside-out learning* Play encourages an intrinsic desire to learn. As Dewey (1987) noted, a spark of intrinsic interest can be nurtured into a flame of committed life purpose. Learning spaces that emphasize extrinsic reward can drive out intrinsically motivated learning (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Kohn, 1993; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

*Learning through minimal teaching.* Unlike most educational environments, the teaching practiced in the ludic learning space was of a different kind. The best learning experiences happened through modeling, informal and friendly coaching, and unlimited opportunity to practice. Regardless of their good intentions, the experienced players who approached the novice players with the "teaching attitude," eventually learned the paradox of play and learning: the less you teach, the more they learn and have fun.

*Heaping praise on good play.* Praising good plays is far more effective than discouraging bad ones. Replaying a bad play in your head does not necessarily promote learning; most of the time it only generates self-defeating self criticism and loss of confidence. A positive reinforcement encourages retroactive learning, whereby players are able to internalize their play and replicate the experience through a recursive practice in the game.

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