

The importance of play

A world of difference exists between games and play. But what is play? It is an attitude, a way of approaching life which can be applied to anything but is not exclusively attached to anything in particular. Play is totally gratuitous, an 'oasis of happiness' in the desert of so-called 'serious' life. To play is, for a moment in time, not to ask life to be anything but what it is. Play is the desire for the here and the now, for the passing and the coming moment.

In a society which is so much focused on the culture of achievement, play is regarded as the 'enemy'. It is defined in negative terms, marginalized in theory and in practice, restricted to exceptional occasions and to clearly defined activities. In fact, few humans are ready to stop and reflect on the fact the impulse to play is fundamentally linked with survival. It is the curiosity and exploration impulse and it is well known that the individual who is in the habit of gratuitously exploring his or her environment has many more opportunities to acquire knowledge in real life situations and is thus better prepared to face the unexpected.

To some extent, all animals play, explore and move around to no apparent purpose. Among humans today, due to social pressure, children are rarely left to themselves to search the world and experience the excitement that many great scientists themselves have talked about when they were on the verge of a great discovery. Instead, they are surrounded with games, preferably educational games and toys. Indeed, in developed countries, the games industry has become one of the most flourishing. However, play is not necessarily involved in these commodity games. In fact, the amount of genuine play diminishes as the game attempts to instruct, inform or indoctrinate, which is what educational games aim at. These are contrary to the very nature of play because play can only be educational in as far as it whets our curiosity about the world and about life itself. No wonder children are at times bored stiff playing games imposed on them but are never tired of conversing with their friends because there are no rules to be observed. Thus, story telling is a playful activity par excellence which children of all climes revel in.

It is unfortunate that few humans retain in adulthood their youthful capacity for play. The essentially materialistic civilization in which we live today is dominated by the desire for what is lacking. It is focused on progress, which means, in effect, on the continual invention of new needs. Room for play has thus been marginalized. But we remain blind to the fact that if hard work, organizing power and determination are necessary in achieving what we call progress, creativity and myth remain the basic requirements of invention. We must therefore the truth of an idea which at first may seem paradoxical – that progress, like culture is born in play.