



Marek Siwicki

The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Poland

ORCID 0000-0001-5467-1991

Beata Szurowska

The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Poland

ORCID 0000-0003-3372-5684

Flow and rationality of a child's optimal play experience

Flow i racjonalność optymalnego doświadczenia w zabawie dziecka

Abstract: The article proposes an examination of the principles and benefits of children's play, taking into account the teachings of Eduard Claparède, but primarily focusing on the phenomenon of flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as an optimal experience of experiencing diversity. Complementing this perspective are the contexts of liminality by Victor Turner, ritualism by Dimitris Xylatasa, and the categories of paideia and illinx by Roger Calois, as well as the concept of free flow by Tina Bruce. Support is provided by an interpretive paradigm that maps the intertwining of free and emotional actions that enhance the value of play in situations of optimal experience. The discussion-oriented nature of the text aims to stimulate researchers' interest in the emotionality of the child in the dimension of extreme otherness and its rationality, with a precautionary concern for the future of young individuals and what is (not) harmful to them.

Keywords: play, childhood, flow, liminality, paidia.

“(…) What seems strange
or unproductive may have the power
to change reality”

(Xylatas, 2023, p. 23)

Introduction

Eugene Fink, following his fellow countryman Friedrich Schiller, wrote that a man's full value is demonstrated by the fact that he plays. He argued that play is a fact of life, everyone knows it subjectively and it falls within the ontological perspective of human existence, because it is a symbolic act in which human life interprets itself (Fink, 1988, pp. 145-157). Howard Chudacoff, considered a *guru* on play and author of the bestseller “Children at Play An American History”, not only suggests but also strikes at the conscience of adults with the conclusions of his research, calling for play to be treated as something good and valuable. Why should we be in a hurry to reprove and change playful, curious children, prematurely forcing them into the serious tones of the “gloomy adults in suits”, a role they will have to play for decades to come? (Thomson, 2021, p. 365). One of the first compact studies on play and classifying it as a field of pedagogy was Ulrich Baer's book *Spielpraxis Eine Einführung in die Spielpädagogik* “Play in practice. An introduction to play pedagogy” published in 1995. Play pedagogy - through Austrian educators, came to Poland in 1990, thanks to the involvement of Zofia Zaorska from the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. The topic of play very quickly gained the attention of, among others, Zbigniew Kwieciński and Bogusław Śliwerski. Lectures and publications in the magazines “Kropla” or “Grupa i Zabawa” contributed to the popularisation and development of play pedagogy¹. The perspective on children's play has changed along with the results of research by developmental psychologists. Stefan Szuman (1985, p. 72) has explored and pointed out the many benefits of children's play for the social and emotional development of the child, who “(…) lives mentally and spiritually thanks to the fact that he has an instinct and a natural need to play, and enjoys, imitates and plays when this need is fulfilled in play activities. The child craves play because play satisfies his desire to act and learn about reality.” This is an unconscious

¹ In 1999, the Polish Association of Play Pedagogy KLANZA was founded. A rich bibliography of monographs or articles on toys and play is held by the Library of the Museum of Toys and Play in Kielce, where the academic journal “Zabawa i Zabawki” [“Play and Toys”] is also published.

goal, but a primary one in building mental schemes and familiarising oneself with difficult situations (Gruszczyk - Kolczyńska, Zielińska, 2016, p. 79). Play teaches and establishes a type of contact, develops social action and experiencing (Kantor, 2013, p 16). In play, not only do the boundaries between the real and the fantastic become blurred, but divisions also disappear - children are equal and can feel confident and comfortable, although they have to follow the rules. Playing together sensitises, teaches subordination and helps to develop pro-integrative competences, which in the future will contribute to building good relationships and shaping attitudes of openness and tolerance towards others (Lubomirska, 2006, p. 6). Anna Brzezińska (Brzezińska et al. 2011) lists selflessness and unproductivity - as the lack of a formal purpose - among the constitutive conditions of play. Play brings pleasure and is realised without the need to do anything specific. The author emphasises the sense of detachment from reality, of being in a different time and space, which involves a great deal of emotional involvement - children "lose themselves" in play, which becomes an important micro-world for them.

A polysensory memory of a good time

A bowl hung on a stick can be a lantern, sticks - animals in the forest and leaves - money. In a few moments a kindergarten table turns into a bus and a blanket hung between chairs into a tent. Children "cook" grass soup and drink coffee in cups with nothing in them. These are "pretend|" actions and, although carefree, require a lot of mental effort from the child, concentration of attention and reaction to unexpected events. Play, usually associated with childhood, is present and useful at every stage of a person's life. Only the specifics change, but it always releases energy, excitement and allows you to test ideas and behaviours with others and yourself. Johan Huizinga describes play as an activity "(...) to which no material interest is attached, through which no advantage can be gained, which takes place within its own definite time and its own definite space" (Huizinga, 2007, p. 29). Play at this age is the result of activities undertaken spontaneously, out of an intrinsic motivation that is directed at satisfying the need for general activity, relaxation and the discharge of emotional tension through experiencing different mental states (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2005, p.39).

The bond with the other built in play stays with the child for a lifetime - as a polysensory memory of a good time, a sense of togetherness, closeness, acceptance. It is an investment in future relationships, in social and emotional intelligence. Depriving a child of play and the associated closeness and shared feelings with peers, siblings, parents, grandparents and teachers

is a deprivation of a young person's basic needs that interferes with his or her normal development. Every child (but also an adult) devotes himself to passionate thinking and acting, pretending to build viaducts over roads and bridges over rushing streams after an ordinary summer downpour. It is a "conscious self-delusion, self-deception". It is a state of mind well realised, voluntarily induced, a kind of split, whereby "(...) the self finds pleasure in comedy, played before itself" (Claparède, 1936, p. 509). Why is the self so willing to give in to delusions? Why does it escape from reality into fantasies, an imaginary world? The simplest answer would be that reality is not enough, and that play provides many opportunities for self-realisation, serves development by giving the child the chance to "(...) follow the momentary line of his greatest interest, in those cases where this cannot be done through serious activities (...), play is therefore a substitute, a replacement for serious activity" (Claparède, 1936, pp. 504-509). The child reaches for this substitution when, firstly, he is not yet capable of serious activities and, secondly, when conditions in serious activities limit his fulfilment. To escape under the influence of a delusion is to create for oneself conditions corresponding to various needs, a substitute realisation of them. "(...) just as the surging waters of a torrent cannot overcome an obstacle, paving a side outlet for the fate of happiness, so does the torrent of impulses, desires and interests that constitutes our self seek an outlet in delusion, play, when reality does not provide it with free paths" (Claparède, 1936, p. 510). In play, the child achieves a sense of agency, which determines the building of self-esteem during this period of life.

Free flow play - between time and space and reality

Victor Turner, in his reflections and investigations on liminality and liminodality², noticed that play was tinged with a rite of passage. The liminality-enriched colour of the play is planted in its transitional nature. If play is treated as a performance - it is, after all, similar in spontaneity and unpredictability - it also has a beginning and an end, therefore a core and a middle as in the liminality phase. Sylwia Jaskulska poses the question of the relationship between liminality and play in the context of the "humanisation" of culture. She wonders how the various manifestations of ritual-ity are used and whether they fit in well with the primary role of play, i.e.

² Limonoid, is more than liminal individually, because it is dedicated to play, leisure and more subversive - producing an alternative status quo. (after Jaskulska. pp. 171-172).

whether play in all its liminal shades is necessary for the child and whether it is developmental. Huizinga does not question the transition - that from seriousness to play and vice versa, because seriousness is inscribed in the aims of play "...). A child plays with full (...) seriousness. But he is playing and he knows that he is playing "...). An actor gives himself entirely to the play. And yet he plays. He is aware that he is playing. A fiddler experiences the most sacred excitement, he experiences something existing beyond and above the ordinary world, and yet his activity remains playing" (Huizinga, 1998 p. 40 after Jaskulska p.174) Liminality is therefore not an inconvenient or necessary transitional stage, but a phenomenon in itself, endowed with enormous potential. Turner believed in the creative and fertile power of ritual, as evidenced by Richard Schechner's opinions "...). The term liminality was crucial to the framing of ritual as an anti-structural, creative reality, often *sprinkling* with carnival or play" (Schechner, 2008 p. 8 after Jaskulska p. 171).

Children react with aggression if their play is disturbed. Such a situation calls for a quick "reorganisation" and a return to a not necessarily interesting reality. This is an example of a child's behaviour in a situation of activity and free flow - an experience that is unique and research intriguing. Such play is *free flow play*. It is the child's state of pleasure and a constitutive feature of experience. Tina Bruce, drawing on many theories of play - preparatory exercise or substitute function, for example - emphasises the connection between play and the experience of optimal sensation - a pleasant experience associated with the loss of the sense of time and space. This relaxation enables a better understanding of children's play behaviour. Bruce emphasises a truly intense commitment to play and the importance of the motivation that comes from within the person playing. This also helps to define the role of the adult as an observer, wisely supporting the playing child (after Bilewicz, 2017 p. 114). The free flow play absorbs the participant to such an extent that his or her activity is almost automatic, although spontaneous. And this state is *flow* understood by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2023) as a full commitment to a specific activity combined with a sense of detachment from reality, it is its hallmark.

Discovering happiness is no accident...

What determines the fulfillment announced by Bruce in an activity that flows freely between time and space and reality? If play provides the sensation of time flowing differently, it means that people, "(...) absorbed in an activity that is important to them and enjoyed, experience it quite differently. (...) There is then a feeling of satisfaction" (after Bilewicz, 2017 p. 114). People who indulge in play are in a particular space and place. It is all real, it is all actual, but when the fun begins: "(...) The person seems to be physically present, but remains as if absent, may not hear the messages directed to him or her, acts in another spatio-temporal reality, in another dimension, floats on the wave of activity, is immersed in it" (after: Bilewicz 2017 p. 114). And that is when *flow* appears, a term introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly. Such movement, as if effortless, in a state of cosmic weightlessness; such floating by a magical force with a deep sense of joy and fulfillment, an activity in a simple, zero-one line, me-action, me-satisfaction. It is a flow that takes the person having fun and his sense of self to an even higher level where alienation gives way to involvement, satisfaction takes the place of boredom, helplessness turns into a sense of control over external situations, and mental energy strengthens the self instead of being wasted on achieving goals (Csikszentmihaly, 2023, p. 129). The energy invested in the activity is beneficial in terms of strengthening the self and entering a higher level of personality development.

Based on the stories of thousands of people of all ages - about how they feel doing simple, everyday tasks - Csikszentmihaly used the concept of flow to develop a theory of optimal experience "(...) a state in which we are so engaged in action that nothing else matters to us. The experience is so pleasurable that we pursue it even at great cost - for the sheer satisfaction of the notion of action" (Csikszentmihaly, 2023 p. 20). It took the researcher a quarter of a century to analyse thousands of questionnaires and interviews before he could say that happiness is not an external event for us, but "(...) the effect of how we interpret these events. What each of us has to prepare for, and once we have achieved it, take care of it ourselves" (Csikszentmihaly, 2023 p. 17). The discovery of happiness is not a coincidence, it is not the result of fate; you will not achieve it thanks to money or influence from political agency. However, many people experience anxiety and boredom instead of happiness, even though there are many opportunities and occasions around them to enjoy happiness; the multitude of opportunities, the power of scientific achievements of mankind or simply extraordinary family moments. So what is the result of the occurring events, not necessarily

directed towards happiness? The researcher puts it this way: "(...) Individuals who learn to control their inner experiences will be able to determine the quality of their own lives - and this is the ability that allows them to get closer to full happiness" (Csikszentmihaly, 2023 p. 16-17)³. It can happen that someone or something may disrupt the feeling of flow, the autotelic experience, the *flow*. It takes time to return and is not easy, because a person, pulled out of the *flow*, looks as if he or she is absent, irritable, surly. Children who experience a state of flow "(...) feel at ease, safe and secure, assimilate deeper learning content faster, and the development of competences is more efficient in conditions of emotional comfort and involvement" (Bilewicz, 2017 p. 116). Children feel happy when they feel at ease, as is shown by the results of surveys carried out in secondary schools in the USA⁴.

A prerequisite for activity in flow play is the absence of coercion, when the activity is undertaken without pressure, independently and voluntarily, with control over its course or going beyond real time and place (Bilewicz, 2017 p. 114). Huizinga, in his canonical work "Homo ludens" (2005), writes that "(...) all play is first and foremost a free activity. Commanded play is no longer play, at most it can only be a prescribed recreation of play" (Huizinga, 2005 pp. 21-22). The development of modern technology has meant that cyberspace has not only become an environment for the natural functioning of modern man, but has also opened up as a new arena for children's play. This requires particular care, because in a virtual reality with numerous stimuli acting very strongly on the senses, it becomes common to have a vague perception of the boundaries between the real and the fictional. It is difficult for the child to distinguish between the two worlds, hence the requirement for pedagogical vigilance to ensure that virtual "pretend" play

³ It seems that this message is well reflected in the situation of happy fulfillment (the authors' proposed term). "(...) This is what a sailor feels like while holding the course when the gusts of wind unfurl his hair and the boat jumps on the waves like a foal - when the sails, the hull, the wind and the sea hum a common melody that harmonises with the pulse of the blood in his veins (Csikszentmihaly 2022 p. 18). Csikszentmihaly describes the moment when painters reach a state of optimal experience: "(...) when a magnetic tension begins to build up between the colours on the canvas and a new, living form is born before the eyes of the amazed artist (Csikszentmihaly 2022 p. 18)".

⁴ The participants of the study, which lasted from Monday to Sunday (seven days), were given watches that signalled at random hours between 7.30 and 22.30 that it was time to fill in a questionnaire asking about where the respondent was at the moment, what they were doing and how they assessed their level of happiness – whether they were happy or not. It turned out that the happiest moments were those spent talking to or entertaining with friends (Siwicki 2021 pp. 374-375).

is not perceived as the real world - comfortable and beautiful, but addictive, with a full range of psycho-physical consequences (Siwicki, 2021 p. 356). This is an important new task for the adult who understands that a young child needs to be cared for in both the real and virtual worlds, so he or she is a companion in the child's (also playful) exploration of the media space, teaching how to function safely in it (Szurowska 2021, p. 82).

According to the theory of flows - in any play situation, if it is voluntary, attractive and emotionally engaging, it is possible to feel a strong sense of closeness, to experience together and to connect in a sense of magical detachment from reality. But it is in this separation that the child in play comes extremely close to discovering the truth about the world. Maria Przetacznik-Gierowska writes that the whole world of the child is subordinated to play (Przetacznik-Gierowska, 1993, p. 20), and thanks to its projective function, play enables children to acquire new skills, build relationships and learn about the world and themselves. This is because, in a safe space and environment, they have the courage to act, to create, to experiment; also independently - feeling a sense of agency that contributes to their self-esteem.

Dimitris Xygalatas (2023) mentions *flow* when he writes about ritual behaviour in ethnic groups and from there he extracts acts that make sense. He points to feelings caused by the flow in events, which are completely absorbing, because "(...) our mind sifts out all the secondary details so that we can focus on the central point" (Xygalatas, 2023, p. 149). The author calls this an "optimal" experience which, as autotelic, should be understood as an activity (and play) that has an end in itself. Therefore, the child does not need external motivation (hints or parental consent) to lose himself in the joy of play. It is an essential feeling of power, a sensation that everything comes effortlessly, easily "(...) as if carried by a wave (hence the flow). This deeply spiritual feeling of being lost in the moment is the foundation for some of the most important human actions" (Xylaga 2023, p. 149)⁵. The prerequisite for experiencing *flow* together is the attractiveness of the play for all participants

⁵ Elements of forgetting and flow can be found especially in two contemporary theories of play: the arousal-seeking theory of play and the competence or competence-affective theory of play. The former is about seeking out and provoking strong experiences in extremely dangerous situations. This search for strong sensations, for special experiences of something difficult, dangerous and risky explains the desire to break out of monotony, to stand out with something unique among others and thus gain a special place, a position. The second is rooted in the theory of stimulation-seeking. Here the emphasis is not on risk and emotional experience, but on gaining the satisfaction of excellence in risky activity in created, often difficult, situations (Lipoński, 2002, p. 240).

(both children and adults). This kind of “dual-addressability” is encountered in literature or fairy tales, the construction of which allows a given work to be received at different perceptual and interpretative levels, thus extending the boundaries of the potential addressee⁶.

***Paidia* - the primordial gift of improvisation and enjoyment**

Roger Caillois (1973) lists the primordial characteristics of primitive play, where freedom, entertainment, fantasy and the power to relax dominate. In dividing play by the dominant elements of competition: (agon), chance (alea), imitation (mimicra) or bewilderment (ilinx), he emphasises the value of different varieties of play. For our inquiries, the most useful seems to be *illix*, i.e. in essence, the reigning unbridled debauchery, free improvisation and carefreeness “(...) a luxuriant imagination freed from all ties, which can be described by the word *paida*” (Caillois, 1973 p. 309)⁷. *Illix* as giddiness, bewilderment, falling into oblivion, is realised in - and goes hand in hand with - the playfulness of flow activity and detachment from reality (Caillois, p. 328). Caillois and his *illix* is similar to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's *flow* in that they both write about the phenomenon of bewilderment, giving it different terms but with a common denominator - a sense of happiness.

Children move around in circles looking for an imbalance (and an eclipse of consciousness) because they find a kind of pleasure in it. That is what playing “top toy” is all about as the child turns on his heel. In the Haitian game of “golden corn”, children hold hands and, leaning back, spin until they are out of breath. They experience the delights of bewilderment in the process. The children shout loudly while playing, roll down a slope or a haystack with a squeal, slide down the sledge, push the merry-go-round to make it go as fast as possible and swing as if they wanted to touch the sky with

⁶ One example is the Winnie the Pooh books, which arouse the interest of children and adults alike. Disney films which, although aimed at the youngest, also entertain and move adults. The essence of dual-addressability is to guarantee pleasure when the child and adult function together. Therefore, it is important to choose the right type of play so that none of the participants counts the time, and the emotions of the child and the adult and the sharing of different emotional states build a sense of closeness. “(...) the adult's memory is like the foundation of a house - buried, hidden, but even though it is invisible, everything is based on it” (Grzelak, 2000, p. 20)

⁷ The researcher uses the term *paida* - a gift of enjoyment and improvisation that goes hand in hand with *ludus* - a predilection for selfless effort. Recalling the Sanskrit *kreati* (meaning both adult and child play) he expands on the meaning and importance of lifelong playfulness “(...) jumping, quick free movements, expressing an excess of joy or vitality” (Caillois, 1973, p. 329).

their feet (Caillois, 1964, p. 324). "(...) Hilda flew high up above the crowns of the fruit trees. Embracing the ropes of the swing, with her head thrown back, she cut the air and, like a little girl, raised the noses of her high-top shoes. She opened her mouth as if drinking something. She fell below the fence and flew upwards, increasing the momentum to feel the delightful itch that tingled from her feet to the top of her head. She completely surrendered to this bewilderment, drawn in like a whirlpool. The un-oiled swings were groaning" (Kosztolányi, 2020 p. 47).

Caillois, considering the different types of rapture going hand in hand with some kind of organic or mental confusion, proposed the term *ilinx*, which in Greek means "whirlpool": this is where the term "vertigo - ilings" comes from (Caillois, 1964, p. 325). And we must remember that (...) pleasure is not an exclusive prerogative of man. It is important to recall the "waterbrain" that various mammals, especially rams, suffer from. Even if we are dealing here with a pathological manifestation, it is too significant to be passed over in silence. (...) Dogs chase their tails until they are out of breath, and at other times they go crazy and run around until they are exhausted. Antelopes, wild horses, gazelles often panic, which does not correspond to any real danger (...) it is rather the result of some irresistible *epidemic* and the pleasure with which one is subjected to it. (...) Above all, birds love to play bewildering games. They drop like a stone from a considerable height, unfolding their wings only a few metres above the ground, as if they wanted to smash against it" (Caillois, 1964, p. 326).

Caillois refers to the primordial gifts of improvisation and enjoyment as *paidia* explaining that it is "(...) a term that encompasses the spontaneous manifestations of the playful instinct: a cat entangled in a ball of wool (...) an infant laughing at a rattle - represent the first tangible examples of this type of activity. It comes to the fore in all kinds of enjoyment expressed in immediate, disorderly movements, spontaneous, free play, willingly exceeding the limits. And its fundamental, or perhaps only *raison d'être* is spontaneity, the absence of any rules" (Caillois, 1964, p. 329). The adults' offer of bewilderment ranges from getting drunk and dancing (...) to all sorts of violent, feverish, convulsive thrashings. Similar pleasure is achieved through intoxication caused by great speed experienced, for example, on a motorbike" (Caillois, 1964, p. 326). Intoxication is a state closer to a spasm than detachment in play - a specific bewilderment, momentary panic, which can best be called "vertigo" - as a detachment from reality. It is related to *ilinx*, because it is an attempt to temporarily annihilate consciousness, a kind of delightful panic. In *ilinx* the participant achieves a kind of spasm, trance

or intoxication, induced by "dizziness". "(...) The dervishes pursue ecstasy by spinning around their own axis to the accompaniment of increasingly rapid drum beats. They achieve panic and a hypnotic state through a paroxysm of feverish rotations. In Mexico, the voladores - Huastecas or Totanacas - climb to the top of a mast twenty to thirty metres high. Artificial wings attached to their wrists transform them into eagles. They are tied around their waist with the end of a rope that then passes between their toes, which allows them to fall head down with their arms spread. In their flight towards the ground, they make a number of complete circles, thirteen according to Torquemade, drawing a downward widening spiral. The ceremony - which involves a couple of flights and begins at midday - is often interpreted as a sunset dance, with birds - the deified dead - accompanying the dance. As a result of frequent accidents, the Mexican authorities prohibited these dangerous feats" (Caillois, 1964, pp. 323-324). Different types of entertainment, not only for children but also for adults, are also found in civilised societies, as evidenced, for example, by the popularity of electric car platforms, where you can race other vehicles, collide with them and cause pseudo-crashes. "(...) In other words, pleasures that are strictly forbidden in real life are used here to the point of excess" (Caillois 1964, p. 459). Xylagatas describes a San Pedro ritual where he analyses the memories of people walking on fire: "(...) I was so excited that I felt like I was floating on waves (p.149)". This is the most apt description of the feeling accompanying the *flow*. In flow and involvement one can find the essence of the value that integrates the participants of the game, i.e. their group identity. Playing together as a group produces a pattern of behaviour and coherent thinking. This insight, derived from ritual rites and behaviours, seems to have an educational relevance, because the narrowing of perception and the concentration on the activity being performed make play an opportunity for happy fulfilment, because "(...) What seems strange or unproductive may have the power to change reality" (Xylatas, 2023 p. 23)

Conclusion

The world of the youngest is increasingly confined to the four walls of a comfortable room - a space with only seemingly modest potential for exploring the world, because the Internet and various games are an excellent opportunity to drift off into play (Tymińska, 2020, p. 3). This is a manifestation of the *bedroom culture* described by Sonia Livingstone (2007), in which the computer, with its various possibilities, has become a permanent part of the child's play world (Feibel, 2006, p. 27). However, depriving a child of the opportunity to play spontaneously and to connect in real closeness

and experience *flow* with other people disrupts social relationships, which can have a negative impact on the child's adult life. Many scholars *a priori* accept play as an inestimable value in child development, often also in the aspect of the child developing play. Hence the belief in the usefulness of children's play, even its necessity. Let a sentence uttered by Aleksander Kamiński, an excellent pedagogue and writer, serve to illustrate this: "Play is active rest (...) realised in an activity that is a goal for itself (...) saturated with imagination, associated with imaginary situations" (Kamiński, 1965, p. 111). The time of happy experiences given by free unstructured play, with characteristic spontaneous action and flow, seems to be an eminently rational activity. It is a short-term benefit with tangible benefits in the future; valuable for the development of the child's physical and mental fitness and social competence. It is also an antidote to the illusory temptations of happiness offered by the modern world.

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