

## Classical Theories of Play & Recreation

CSS 287  
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## Why do people play?



- Scholars have riddled for years, "Why do people play?" (Why is something so frivolous a cultural universal?)
- What useful function does it perform?
- Is it a societal function that should be supported?

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## Definition of Recreation

- Recreation is any form of experience pursued during leisure time in which an individual engages (physically and/or mentally) from choice because of personal enjoyment and satisfaction which it brings directly to that person\*
- \*It is intrinsically motivated, no \$ or compensation is expected).

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## Classical Theories of Play

1. Surplus Energy Theory
2. Relaxation Theory
3. Preparation (instinct/practice)
4. Recapitulation Theory
5. Cathartic Theory
6. Compensation Theory
7. Competence/Effectance Theory

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## Surplus Energy Theory

- Play is motivated by a need to release surplus energy.
- Observe children just before recess...
- It does **not** explain why people with little energy still play.



"Our team will run you into the ground tonight!"

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## Relaxation Theory



- We play because we need to relax from the stresses of our daily life.
- But some people don't lead stressed lives...
- Recreation can often be competitive & stressful...

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## Preparation Theory (Instinct/Practice)

- Play prepares us for adult life by teaching:
  - team work
  - role playing
  - following the rules.
- But did Pilgrim children have a need to play computer games?



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## Recapitulation Theory

- Activities that re-enact events from our history as a race are intrinsically more rewarding.
- Hunting, shooting, hide-&-seek, chasing, & throwing games are seen world-wide.

But many don't reflect history!

(Bungee jumping, hacky-sack, hang gliding, X-Box...)



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## Cathartic Theory

- We play because we need to express disorganized or painful emotions in a harmless way.
- Greek "catharsis" theater purged people of hostile emotions.
- Children re-enact their punishments (scolding a doll...)
- "Taking it out on the other team..."

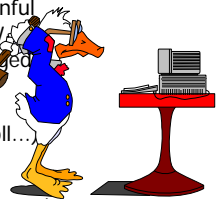


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## Cathartic Theory

(continued)

- We play because we need to express disorganized or painful emotions in a harmless way.
- Greek "catharsis" plays purged people of hostile emotions.
- Children re-enact their punishments (scolding a doll...)
- *But does it explain most recreation?*  
(hiking, baseball, quilting, fly fishing...)



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## Compensation Theory

- We play to satisfy psychic need not satisfied through our work (boring, repetitive jobs...).
- Boredom may motivate some play behavior, but boredom is not necessarily work-related.
- How come librarians may play chess and ditch diggers may play rugby?
- Doesn't fully account for motivation to play.



"Modern" theories

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## Competence/Effectance Theory

- Humans seek to optimize their level of arousal.  
*(We turn loud music down, but, if it is too quiet & we turn it up!)*
- We all have a **need** to generate interactions with our environment (from child to adult).



"Modern" theories

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## Competence/Effectance Theory (continued)

- Optimization of arousal & the need for interaction with our environment leads to the following scenario:
- When we have an effect (i.e. cause a reaction from our environment we get a sense of control & power.  
This gives us a feeling of competence which is rewarding.
- May account for general **motivation** but it can't separate **play** from **work**!



"Modern" theories

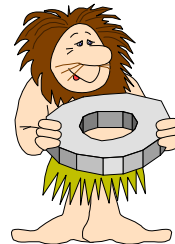


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| Examples of Classical Theories of Play & Recreation |             |
|---|-------------|
| Good Example  | Bad Example |
| 1. Surplus Energy Theory                            |             |
| 2. Relaxation Theory                                |             |
| 3. Preparation (Instinct/Practice)                  |             |
| 4. Recaptulation                                    |             |
| 5. Cathartic  |             |
| 6. Compensation                                     |             |
| 7. Competence/Effectance                            |             |

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## Classical Theories of Play--What good are they?



- No single theory can explain all recreation behavior.
- As managers & providers we will understand people (& their conflicts) better if we understand their motivations.
- ***Play can be the greatest motivator! It defines lifestyles, industries, & major resource allocations.***

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