Classical Theories of Play & Recreation

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?

Classical Theories of Play

1. 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.

2. 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...

3. Preparation (instinct/practice)
4. Recapitulation Theory
5. Cathartic Theory
6. Compensation Theory
7. Competence/Effectance Theory

Surplus Energy Theory

- “Our team will murder yours tonight!”

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?
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, GameBoy...)

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...”

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...)
- Doesn’t explain most recreation... (hiking, baseball, stamp collecting...)

Compensation Theory

- We play to satisfy psychic needs not satisfied through our work (boring, repetitive jobs...).
- Boredom may motivate some play behavior, but boredom is not necessarily work related.
- Librarians may play chess and ditch diggers may play rugby!
- Doesn’t fully account for motivation to play.

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).

Competence/Effectance Theory (continued)

- Optimization of arousal & the need for interaction with our environment leads to the following scenario:
- When we have an effect and cause a reaction from our environment we get a sense of control & power. This gives us a feeling of competence.
- May account for general motivation but it can’t separate play from work!
Classical Theories of Play--
What good are they?

- No single theory can explain all recreation behavior.
- As managers 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.