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?

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).

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

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!"

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...
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, X-Box...)

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...)
- But does it explain most recreation?
  (hiking, baseball, quilting, fly fishing...)

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.
- How come 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 (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

Examples of Classical Theories of Play & Recreation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Good Example</th>
<th>Bad Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surplus Energy Theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxation Theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation (Instinct/Practice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catharsis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence/Effectance</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.