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Citation	乳幼児発達臨床センター年報, 28, 51-61
Issue Date	2006-03
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/25373
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	28_P51-61.pdf



EMERGENCE OF CREATIVITY IN CHILDREN'S PLAY FANTASIES AND WORLD-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the emergent process of and constraints on the creation of collaborative play fantasies among children. In particular, we focus on the continual creation of new ideas during improvised fantasy play. Children display concrete, apprehendable cues for changing themes and play scenarios during fantasy play. In other words, in order to collaborate successfully, children must improvise play scenarios by sharing "contextual meaning" about virtual events and the rules and modes of engagement, during play within their fantasy worlds. In addition to employing effective strategies for creating collaborative fantasies, children must also acknowledge and accept the contextual meaning of fantasy elements used within play interactions, and behave in ways consistent with the fantasized context, as given by the "definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959). This "definition of the situation" is not static but dynamically interactive with regard to the rules and constraints, which define and direct children's collaborative play. This dynamically defined, situational consensus emerges naturally from mutually interactive, participatory play.

Key Words: emergence of creativity, imagination, object activity, fantasy play

INTRODUCTION

The emergent process of and constraints on children's collaborative creation of play fantasies were explored via detailed, in situ observations. In particular, we focused on the roles of available tools and physical environments in children's play activities. These physical materials and conditions function as contexts for the creation of meaning during fantasy formation and constrain the direction and domain of juvenile play activities.

PURPOSE

To explore the creative and emergent nature of children's play, we focused on the

This study was supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (No.16530415), Ministry of Education and Science to the first author. A version of this paper was presented at the 1st International Conference of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR), Seville, Spain, Sept. 20-24, 2005.

dialectical relationship between physical objects and children's actions, and on how the physical environment constrains contextual meaning during play. The emergent processes of children's collaborative play fantasies were analyzed, with a particular focus on the interdependence between play themes and physical materials or physical settings, which serve as the concrete cues of mutual engagement, and which may also serve as constraints that delimit the possible range of contextual meanings derived within and for the fantasy realm.

Materials and physical settings have some potential for forming a contextual basis for fantasy creation. However, such symbolic representations, improvised as play elements, must be shared with the group's participants as cues, from which contextual meaning is derived. We also focused on the activity of "naming", which applies symbolic meanings to otherwise concrete objects as elements of fantasy. These meanings are subject to improvisational changes and the activity of naming is the verbal means by which such amendments and alterations are negotiated and mediated. Such collaboratively derived fantasies must be monitored continuously within the group to determine whether the fantasy framework, elements, and their alterations have been grasped, acknowledged, and accepted by all group participants. Though Silverstein (1985) supports a theory of metapragmatic strategies involving internal mental states, we may instead explain such naming and monitoring activity in terms of the nature of human actions, supported through mediational means and external contextual factors. The illustrious Japanese philosopher, Kitaro Nishida (1933), mentioned the significance of action in curbing the western philosophical tendency to overstate the role of internal self-reflective mental faculties that separate self from world within the operations of individual human consciousness. "We are active beings. In order to act, our actions must possess tools and techniques as the activity of the unity of subject and object" (p.183). In the world of children's play, these are the toys and equipment of play. It might also be significant that children's ideas and the desire to play with things emerge from their own actions and operations with such objects. Therefore, the object of desire may be not merely the so-called 'things'. It may be something expressive.

Background

As Giffin (1984) and Garvey (1984) have suggested, children must undertake the entirely impromptu, multiple roles of actor/actress, director, and author, all performed without a written script, in order to engage in fantasy play. In other words, during successful, collaborative play fantasies, children must improvise their own play scenarios by sharing "the contextual meaning" of fantasy events and how they should respond to them. In order for juvenile participants to share "contextual meaning" in group play, they, as directors of their own, collaboratively improvised drama, must monitor their ongoing play activity to ensure that effective conversational and interactive exchanges continue to occur.

Our research began with the basic question: how do children create new fantasy scenarios, then improvise and negotiate changes in the themes of such play scenarios? Our tentative, seemingly reasonable, answer is that children's proper roles in fantasy play may be realized by the contextual meaning created through interactions with their toys and

immediate, physical environments. For juvenile fantasies, we hypothesize that the contextual meaning, from which the so-called "definition of the situation" is derived, may have the power to define and direct what seem to be the appropriate modes of behavior and the mutually accepted rules of engagement within the fantasy setting.

Children must recognize the contextual signifiers, which allow them to participate and interact within their own collaborative play activity, then act in accordance with the context thus created, as given in Goffman's (1959) "definition of the situation". This "definition of the situation", far from being a static condition, tends to be dynamically interactive, with regard to the improvised rules and constraints that define and direct collaborative play among children. This dynamically defined, mutually derived, situational consensus emerges naturally from interactive, participatory play. Toys, physical items, and physical environments also promote and help create the context for fantasy play, as they help form the "definition of the situation". As cues for constructing contextual meaning, the symbolic representations and meanings of these things must be shared among all the participants.

Definition of the situation for negotiating peer play

In children's construction of fantasy realms, we have focused on the activity of the "naming" of those elements, be they toys or other aspects of the immediate physical environment, that are ascribed symbolic meanings, i.e., fantasized to be or stand for something else. These symbolic ascriptions are quite labile and negotiated mutually and improvisationally, via the activity of "naming" as a means of verbal mediation.

For anyone, child or adult, to share in the "contextual meaning" created by children involved in group play, they must also be able to monitor the ongoing play activity to determine whether effective conversational and interactive exchanges are being elicited, in order to pursue their roles as co-directors of the collaborative drama. Silverstein (1985) has expressed this monitoring activity in terms of what he terms, "metapragmatic strategies". However, such an explanation tends to depend too heavily on the cognitive monitoring or self-reflective faculty of human consciousness.

Instead, we hypothesize that play activity and fantasy construction, though constrained by external physical elements and mediated through collaboration, issues largely from the natural impulse for human action in general. It is natural that we satisfy desire through physical action, and effective action requires that we create and alter material elements of the objective physical world.

Thus, we are naturally active beings. However, in order to act, we must possess and wield tools and techniques, as part of the quest to unify subject and object in the gratification of desire. Within the fantasy world of children's play, these tools and techniques are simply the toys and equipment involved in play-making.

It may be noteworthy that children's impulses and the desire to play with things emerge from their own interactions with and manipulations of objects. Thus, the object of desire may not be merely the toy or external physical object in itself, but rather also encompasses the impulse to express the self or selves through interactions with the external world.

Vygotsky's thesis of children's play

For children's group fantasy play, it is necessary to create and maintain imaginative activity through collaboration. However, Vygotsky also noted that the realm of imagination in children emerges and develops on the basis of their concrete operations with toys and other physical materials. In his 1933 lecture at the A. I. Gertsen Leningrad Federal Pedagogical Institute, Vygotsky stated that, "Like all functions of consciousness, imagination arises originally from action" (p.93).

His lecture was short and simple, and we summarize its essential theses as:

- Fantasy play does not separate or distinguish the real world from imagination.
- Play themes embody socio-cultural meanings drawn from the larger society.
- Play is a form of symbolic action based on interactions with external objects via mediational means that involve ritual elements.

In this same context, Vygotsky also postulated the emergence of children's imagination and its role in children's play activity, as follows.

- There is no opposition between imagination and reality.
- This implies a dialectical relationship between reality and imagination.
- Fantasy play develops from external actions on physical objects. Thus, it does not result just from internal emotional states or activities of the imagination.
- The process of fantasy play is characterized by exaggeration, reduction and inversion, which allow children to discover new, unpredictable connections in their interpretation of reality.

To follow the Vygotsky-Leont'ev thesis that children's fantasy play emerges from concrete interactions with physical objects and tools, we must focus on the relation between objects and children's actions toward them, and on the immediate physical environment that helps direct and constrain contextual meanings during play activity. Children's play manifests through the repurposing of real objects and physical environments, which serve as concrete elements that link back to the real world, and which validate their collaborative fantasy realm and its creation. However, these concrete elements are then signified as objects within the fantasy realm and the contextual information derived from these objects is then re-interpreted in terms of the fantasy domain. Recently, Göncü (1999) has also recognized that the basis of children's play can be understood through the presence of objects and physical environments and their reinterpretation vis a vis Vygotsky-Leont'ev's theory of children's play.

METHOD

We have observed and analyzed the emergent processes of children's collaborative fantasies for a variety of different themes and play scenarios and for how the available physical space, its arrangement and the elements and objects within it may constrain how children create their pretend play. In particular, we focused on the interdependent relationship between the play themes that emerged and the toys or physical settings, which become factors that may constrain the creation of contextual meaning, along with the concrete cues of mutual engagement during play activities. We also focused on the process of creating new ideas for play fantasies and the improvised reconstruction of play scenarios.

Micro-sequential analyses of conversational and interactive processes during fantasy play activity were performed for a group of children from 4 to 6 years old. The children attended an experimental program for preschool education, which was attached to Hokkaido University.

RESULTS

1. Children's imaginations are bound to simplistic reductions of real life

In principle, we may say that children's imagery during play fantasies are bound to experiences in their real lives and in society. Themes, stories, and roles that play episodes enact express the children's understanding and appropriation of socio-cultural meaning from real society. As Vygotsky mentioned, we can observe children standing in the moment as both the "historical child and the transitory child" (1934). That is, we can view children in both a socio-historical context and in the emergent new world of their imaginations.

For example, children played house in the same ways that they recalled as familiar behaviors in the kitchen, among mothers, fathers, and siblings. Girls played the part of homemaker or daughters in the proper manner, although they sometimes panicked when food was overcooked. Children's play behavior was directed by the toys and equipment available for playing house. These tools and physical settings seemed to place overall limitations on the possible play scenarios and restricted the emergence of highly creative play.

We can view children's play as a socially symbolic activity. In children's fantasies, "doctor" is a familiar theme. However, children cannot assume the role of doctor accurately, for they don't know what medical doctors really do or how they behave in real hospitals. Hence, children can't avoid falling into simplistic, stereotypical behaviors that are performed in a typically routine and fairly non-divergent manner.

Illustration 1: After playing at building a house, Tatu and Naoko re-interpreted the space as a hospital to initiate a new, more elaborate fantasy as medical doctors with a doll as patient. However, when they tried to operate on the doll-patient with a knife and scissors, they did so in a somewhat random fashion. Their self-generated play



Figure 1 Play doctor with doll

options focused on the fantasy operation and how to wear the toy stethoscope properly. This suggests that Tatuo and Naoko were able to draw on only a few experiences and little knowledge concerning possible scenarios within a hospital context (Figure 1).

The above example illustrates that the themes, stories, and roles that play episodes enact express children's appropriation of socio-cultural meaning within their society but rendered within a limited scope and with a limited level of comprehension.

2. The arrangement of physical space directs children's play activity

We attend to children's voluntary activities in constructing their physical setting for play fantasies. In the next illustration, we illustrate how physical space, once it is associated with a specific context and purpose, can serve to constrain, direct and channel the scenarios, manner, and actions involved in children's play.

Illustration 2: Children arranged the room as the bakery shop and factory of a bakery. At the shop counter, children played shop-girls, while within the inner area they played bakery workers. The arrangement of the desk and chairs in partitioning the space provided cues to share a meaningful context for role playing activities at the make-believe bakery.

A girl, Michiko, played a talented shop-girl at the counter, performing this role quite appropriately. Michiko checked the order of the customer (teacher) politely, and asked the customer if she had a service coupon. Meanwhile, within the inner portion of the play area, which served as a corner of the feigned bakery factory, many children made simulated loaves of bread using clay (Figure 2)



Figure 2 Pretend play of bakery shop

3. Children's play activity and themes may change in a sparsely arranged space.

With an undirected and weakly constructed play domain with limited equipment, children's play was confused, such that they could not develop well-structured story lines.

Illustration 3: At the beginning of a play period, the children negotiated a family game as their play theme and undertook to play each role.

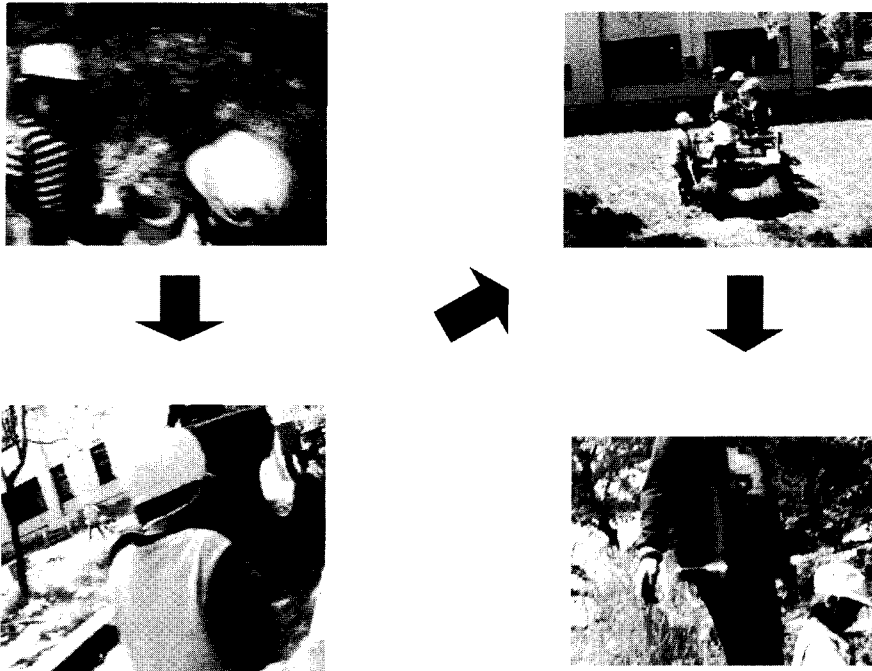


Figure 3 Children's play in open field

Nana (girl) and Tatuó (boy) took turns assuming the role of father of the family, and began to repair the roof of their house. Other children also played family members. However, the story of the family game did not develop very far along the new scenario. Instead, the children moved to a different area and changed to a new theme because they lacked toys that could pose as implements for the house fantasy.

Suddenly the family game ceased, and play along a new theme (play train) erupted. This shift occurred suddenly. However, after awhile, the story theme suddenly returned to the family game, as they began to gather edible wild plants within the previous familial context.

Thus, children's play in an open field did not pursue a single story line. The theme sometimes shifted to a different play activity. The previous play theme also reappeared suddenly at times. In such a case, the concrete physical space may lack the appropriate equipment to cue role play that furthers the story development. The perceived lack of toy-props to fuel and direct play behavior was one of the reasons that the original play theme was discontinued. Children could, perhaps, only return to the original theme, when it occurred to them that plants available in the open field could be used by the family for the sub-story plot of foraging for edibles (Figure 3).

4. Children's imaginary worlds emerged from operations with objects

In this section, we discuss how children's fantasies are determined through active engagement with physical objects. Apparently, in children's play fantasies meanings may become quite dissociated from their objective referents, e.g., a piece of wood can stand for a doll. In this sense, play pretense involves the creation - in the imagination - of a world



Figure 4 Pretend play of computer user with mirror

dominated by improvised meanings. On the other hand, children's play realms may also be reified by the presence of physical objects and environments, once these objects and environments are reinterpreted within vague limits in the context of the play realm.

Illustration 4: Tatu manipulated a small mirror as if it were a computer monitor (Figure 4). Taku, Tatu's playmate, also acknowledged and accepted the meaning of this object, and played with Tatu collaboratively on this basis.

As Vygotsky described, for the child the object dominates the object/meaning polarity and meaning is subordinated to it. "For a child a stick can be a horse, but a postcard can't be." (Vygotsky, 1933, p.98). Thus, for fantasy creation certain attributes of physical objects set definite limits on the lability of re-interpretation or malleability of object definitions.

Imagination develops from action applied to external objects, and not simply as a result of internal emotion or will. However, play is not only a reproduction of reality or replication of real-world meaning dependent on starting materials. It might be better to regard play as the process of creative interpretation, in which imagination is both a prerequisite for and a result of the play activity. The relationship between imagination and actions, applied to physical materials or external objects, is really a dialectic. In order to act, our actions must possess tools as the activity of the unity of subject and object. "Aristotle said that the form of a house exists in the mind, but the form of the house does not merely exist within the head of the architect. For the form of the house is not mere fancy. It is an objective possibility. — The active self must be mediated by something expressive, and therefore tools are also expressive." (Nishida, 1933, p.181-183). Our true self must be conceived as activity. The unity of our consciousness is essentially grounded on action. We view something through action and make something by it.

CONCLUSIONS

The external world as well as children's activity is reflected in the creation of play fantasies. Of course, the reflection from the external world to internal representations is not merely a mechanical mirror image. This transformation is at first realized through the children's own interpretative process of imagination. This can be called the creative

process. At this point we may summarize as follows.

- Creative transformation is processed by peers collaboratively.
- The situation is defined or redefined through this transformation.
- These relationships are dialectic.

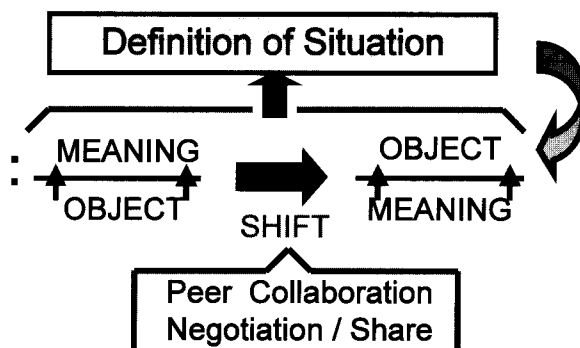


Figure 5 Shift change of object/meaning ratio

Children at play operate with meanings detached from their usual objects and actions. However, they also fuse fantasies with real actions and real objects. In children's play, the perspective may shift from depending on real objects to being independent of them. This ratio of reality-grounded to improvised meaning gradually becomes inverted and the fantasy meaning predominates. While at play, children are in a transitional state between purely situational constraints and being totally free of real situations.

During play, children's fantasy realms and the meanings of physical objects used as implements for and of play are formulated through verbal labeling as well as the actual manipulation of the objects.

The creation of an imaginary situation during fantasy play means both a certain freedom from situational constraints and some remaining dependence on them.

The definition of the situation is equivalent to children's collaborative construction of their play world with their peers and the manipulation of real, external, physical objects, albeit with a reinterpretation of meanings, consistent with the current play theme.

In fantasy play, children sometimes reinterpret their physical or perceptual context in a unique manner, and for collaborative play to be successful, they must all share and accept largely the same set of meanings for their objects and play scenarios. Goffman (1974) postulated the notion of "frame" as the function for presenting consensus contextual meaning or interpretation to new participants, or for revising the consensus. That is, children must continually re-create and re-interpret this "frame" by re-defining the context based on daily life. This "definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959) is created through the participants' interactions with each other and through the manipulation and improvised re-interpretation of physical objects, such as toys and concrete physical settings.

The "definition of the situation" functions according to a rather labile process of redefinitions, somewhat like the idiomatic nature of "inner speech", postulated by Vygotsky (1934). Using the example of a conversation among six drunken workmen in Dostoevsky's novel, "The diary of a writer" **note 1**, Vygotsky (1934) explained that we sometimes

use the same word repeatedly with half-different and half-identical meanings. “What is the garbled exception in external speech (e.g., a conversation among six drunken workmen) is actually the rule for inner speech. In inner speech, we can always express all thoughts and sensations — even a whole chain of reasoning — through a single word” (Vygotsky, 1934). Externalizing this internal dialogue, children make and use physical materials, while supplying meaningful context, using elements of inner speech as cues for their definition of the situation.

Concerning the problem of the interdependent relationship between action and word, Vygotsky (1930) postulated the notion that words are required to liberate action from the reality-binding that is seemingly inherent in concrete situations. That is, to create complex, collaborative forms of play fantasy, words are needed as re-signifiers and cueing symbols. However, Vygotsky pointed out that, as a mentally initiated function, human physical action is, genetically speaking, an older formation than verbal discussion. He noted that instrumental thinking exists prior to speech. “Practical intellect is genetically older than the verbal; action precedes the word, and even mental action precedes the mental world” (1930, p.65). At the same time, he stressed the significance of the dialectical and interdependent relationships between words and actions. Thus, we must reject concepts in which speech and action are logically parallel and independent processes. As Vygotsky pointed out, the use of signs and symbols, as exemplified by verbal expression, denotes a qualitatively new interweaving and level of development within the system of human consciousness.

As the closing arguments of the book, “Tool and sign in the development of the child” (1930), Vygotsky said, “We tried to show how the word, itself being intellectualized and developed on the basis of action, raises action to a higher level, subordinates it to the will of the child and places the stamp of the will on action. — if the act, independent of the word, stands at the beginning of development, then at its end stands the word becoming the act. The word makes the action of man free” (p.68). Of course, in this book Vygotsky’s arguments were focused mainly on the role of signs and tools in the development of children’s higher mental functioning. However, his statements are applicable to the general architecture of the dialectical relationship between signs and action in all human mental processing.

Concerning the impact of verbal processes on extending the imagination beyond the apparent confines suggested by concrete objects and physical settings, Vygotsky (1932) gave the following lecture at the Gersten Leningrad Federal Pedagogical Institute. “Speech frees the child from the immediate impression of an object. It gives the child the power to represent and think about an object that he has not seen. Speech gives the child the power to free himself from the force of immediate impressions and go beyond their limits. The child can express in words something that does not coincide with the precise arrangement of objects or representations” (p.346).

And at the end of this lecture, Vygotsky concluded that, as children develop, their representations of real objects gradually become more accurate and precise. At advanced levels in the development of thinking, we find the construction of images that are not found in completed form in reality. By recognizing this, we can begin to understand the complex relationship between the activity of realistic thinking and the activity of advanced forms

of imagination. Each step in a child's achievement of a more profound penetration of reality is linked with his continued liberation from earlier, more primitive forms of cognition (p.349).

note 1: Dostoevsky describes the language of several drunks, which consisted of a single unprintable noun. "Once on Sunday, near evening, we happened to walk alongside a crowd of six drunken workers for fifteen paces. I suddenly became convinced that it is possible to express all thoughts and sensations — even a whole chain of reasoning — through a single short noun. One member of the group sharply and energetically pronounced a word, expressing his own scornful rejection of something they had been talking about. In response, another repeated this same noun, using an entirely different tone and sense, expressing serious doubt about the validity of the first speaker's rejection.—". (from Dostoevsky's "The diary of a writer" 1876).

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