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Creative Expression & the Journey of the Human Spirit Through Critical Play

Game play and fantasy offer people a low risk and low stake arena to develop emotional, social and relational intelligence skills and deepen their greater awareness of humanity and life. Modern practitioners within the field of psychology have developed methodologies that utilize what is available through improv and performance when working with the human spirit. The growth available through play activities reach beyond the game world and can be applied in everyday life, particularly when accompanied with critical reflective learning.

When considering the definition of game play and its relationship to human culture in their book, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (2013), author Mary Flannagan says that "games create cognitive and epistemological environments that position the player or participant with the experiences previously described in meaningful ways" (5). Flannagan cites anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith, a leading play theorist, who says "play spaces are generally fantasy spaces, players often experience real stakes when inside them", for example the "serious" aspects of play evident in sport and gambling (4). Flannagan also references cultural theorist Johan Huizinga and their concept that becomes known as "the magic circle" (Huizenga 1935), who became well known for his contributions to game studies (5), who states that by nature play is absorbing, and that it is positioned intentionally within fixed limits of time and space, delineated materially or ideologically, and is separate than everyday life (5). Flannagan citing Huizinga, adds that while play is a voluntary act, it also has rules that are both freely accepted and binding (5), and even

though acts of play are (typically) not intended to be serious, play impacts larger world social development because of how it influences cultural rituals and customs (5).

Flannagan states that “critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces” (6). When speculating on what it means to “play critically”, Flannagan says it means to “create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life” (6). An example of a critical play approach to game design might be to create a set of rules by which to examine a specific issue, and the rules would be relevant to the issue (6). When considering what is available with applying critical frameworks to the design, Flannagan suggests that criticality in play can be encouraged to provide a necessary and under-represented viewpoint or offer an analytical framework to question an aspect of a game that might be taken for granted as default without question (6).

Stephen Nachmanovitch in their book, *Free play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (1990), talks about creativity as a playful practice that can tap into inner sources available through spontaneity and offers their methods for people in any field who want to connect with and develop their own creative powers (5). Amongst numerous questions about the energy of inspiration that moves us, Nachmanovitch ponders what is the “Source” we tap into when we create and where the playful spirit imagination comes from (5). As a performing and practicing musician, Nachmanovitch is particularly interested with how intuitive music, or any kind of inspiration arises within us, including how it may be blocked, derailed, or obscured by unavoidable realities of life, and how it can be liberating to sing or speak, write or paint; express from our authentic voice (5). Nachmanovitch holds improvisation as a “master key to creativity” (6), that (in a sense) all art is improvisation (6), and that what is reached through improvisation

in the feel of the journey itself (6). Nachmanovitch points out that across all the diverse forms of creative expression, there exists a “unitive experience that is the essence of the creative mystery" (9), and asserts that the urge to create is fundamental to human life and to repress that urge needlessly is an act that detracts from the human spirit. Nachmanovitch classifies creativity as "divine play", saying that the creative process is a "spiritual path" (12–13) and distinguishes this sense of a cosmic divine as separate from the influence of organized religion (9).

When considering the transformative end results of applying Nachmanovitch's methods to the creative writing process, Janis Butler Holm in their essay *Nachmanovitch's Free Play as a Context for Experimental Writing* (2010), describes how *Free Play* advocates a kind of teaching and learning that calls into question conventional methods, describing how they used Nachmanovitch's book to work with students in their creative writing course (579). Holm appreciates the specific protocols for behaviour and authentic tone of Nachmanovitch and the inclusion of their personal experiences when implementing their own tools and protocols to support creative improvisation and play (579). Holm critiques *Free Play*, in its disparity of examples representing women’s creativity, and the author describes how they used this as a teaching moment, to demonstrate that even the best of resources can also have its glaring omissions and contradictions (579-80).

Within the context of their creative writing course, Holm’s students were given the invitation to reflect on institutional obstacles (582). Holm situates their class discussion in a larger social framework, acknowledging the limits placed on teachers who, in underfunded and problematic school systems, must work with classes that are too-large (to best serve student learning) and using course materials that are not of their choosing (582), and discussed examination based evaluations of learning pushed forward within legislation, politicians and

governance (582). Holm notes that the class's animated discussion of early obstacles to creativity allowed for deeper class bonding and a new openness to creative play (583). Holm shares that the class transformation that occurred was one in which they fully participated (584). They say that before offering this experimental writing course, they would have assumed undergraduates would not enjoy completing two writing assignments a week, or that they could be so excited to read and to respond to them (584).

Holm finds that creating an environment where class members feel free to write experimentally requires "letting go of some cherished assumptions", such as the drive to work only towards a polished final product and the value of grades as an incentive (584). Holm reflects that despite being generally successful in their teaching career, they had not experienced the pleasure of a regular biweekly written exchange, where teacher and student explore together the possibilities of the course materials, nor had they anticipated how the experimental exercises would influence students' descriptive ability to write, generate more engaging figures of speech and more persuasive argument, and how the absence of grades and eliminating this standard reward, could lead to work that is fuller, richer, and deeper (584). Holm contends that while universities battling the inflation of grade value look down on the practice of "responding to papers without assigning grades, and providing substantial feedback each week" is a luxury that many post-secondary instructors can't afford, especially within the wider scope of "publish-or-perish" tenure track expectations (584-85). Holm shares that for those instructors who have the independence, time, energy, and space to experiment radically, Nachmanovitch's approaches to creative process in the book *Free Play* offers the possibility of a more authentic, liberatory class experience because it invites student writers to discover and explore their inner creative sources and make something with it (585).

Authors Sören Henrich & Rachel Worthington in their article *Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment regarding the Therapeutic Utility of 'Dungeons & Dragons'* (2021), write about the application of roleplaying in therapeutic settings. The writers offer research and data that over the past decade to show how Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), a fantasy roleplaying game (RPG), has emerged as a new way to approach therapy, and is a relevant antidote to the current backdrop of social isolation during COVID-19 by offering ways to stay connected to family and peers (1). The paper acknowledges that the available research of games in therapeutic interventions is limited and/or in its infancy (2). Despite that lack, the authors find there is a wide breadth of knowledge regarding therapeutic roleplaying (2). Henrich & Worthington describe an approach to roleplay has been defined to create an imaginary reality that is a type of "experiential technique that involves a reenactment of real or imaginary situations from a person's past, present or the future that is commonly used to improve a person's ability to understand emotions, and how they are related to current triggers or to model ideal behaviors and practicing skills in a safe environment" (Moreno 1978, Keulen-de Vos et al 2017, Matthews, M., Gay, G., & Doherty, G 2014) (2). Henrich & Worthington say that in combination with several therapy modules, roleplaying is frequently shown to increase positive effects (3). The research article propose that the use of roleplay and drama therapy can act more effectively and quickly than verbal psychotherapies alone and cite numerous research articles that demonstrate how roleplay facilitates attitudinal change more effectively than psychoeducation, increasing sense of self and confidence, as well as relational attitudes (3).

Henrich & Worthington also look at research that suggests that some types of clients struggle to benefit from roleplaying interventions, making them feel "awkward and uncomfortable" (3) and found that for these kinds of approaches to be effective, "participants

must have the ability to trust, work collaboratively, and have rapport with the person facilitating the roleplay" (3). The stigmatized view of roleplay as childish and inner-personal qualities such as being shy, reserved, lacking in confidence, were all found to be barriers to engagement (3). The authors share findings that show some cultural groups are uncomfortable with pretending to impersonate others as occurs in the act of roleplay, and that the cultural traits of individualism and uncertainty avoidance also predicted engagement in group work participation (3). Henrich & Worthington point out that despite the benefits of roleplaying in therapy have been established, research also shows that therapists sometimes struggle to deliver modules of this type due to "therapist drift, i.e., non-adherence to evidence-based treatment" (4). The research in this article shows that the implementation of therapeutic role playing is often hindered by the therapist's lack of knowledge (11).

When considering how to apply roleplay and critical reflection to personal development and experiential learning participation, one might consider the importance of mindset/attitude and training of the participant and the experiential learning facilitator or psychotherapist towards the exercise, as well as the participant's personal belief in the overall effectiveness of roleplay as a technique, and willingness to challenge old beliefs or assumptions to discover new perspectives (Holm 2010, Henrich & Worthington 2021). Flannagan says that a good game must be safe and engaging, and that its elements must be cohesive, well integrated, and its interaction scenarios should be meaningful (61). Flannagan states that that games which take on characteristics of roleplay, "encourage critical play by providing environments for context perversion and emergent community formation, altering subjective lived experiences that negotiate the risks of the real world (61).

Works Cited

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