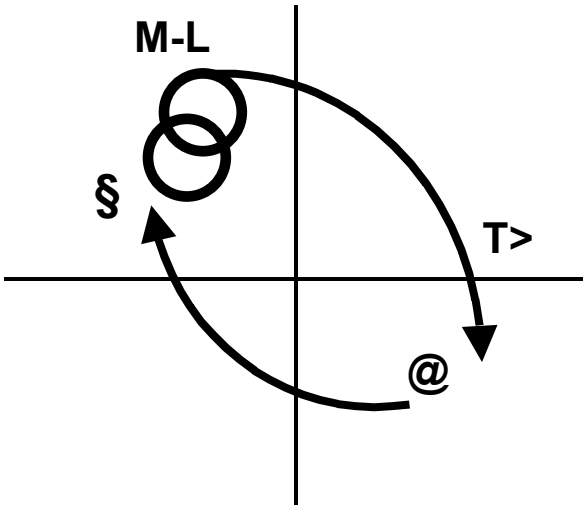
The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healing

'The Colorado Paper'



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> Chinese baseball is played almost exactly like American baseball – the same field, players, bats and balls, method of scoring, and so on. The batter stands in the batter's box, as usual. He winds up, as usual, and zips the ball down the alley. There is only one difference, and that is: After the ball leaves the pitcher's hand, and as long as the ball is in the air, *anyone* can move *any* of the bases *anywhere*.
>
> Fred Donaldson [1]

Throughout this paper, we use the term playworker to describe adults active in play work with children. Of course, this description is intended to include parents and other adults active in playing with children.

Similarly, we use the term child or children interchangeably, as a playworker may work with one child or with several. We also use the plural term 'they' alongside the single term 'child' in preference to the more traditional male form 'his' or the currently used 'he/she' or 'his/hers'.

Note on this edition 2003
In common with the long established academic practice of the lead author taking precedence in co-written papers, this edition correctly places Gordon Sturrock ahead of Perry Else. The original citation was due to an administrative error at the time of the IPA/USA 1998 Conference and is happily corrected with this electronic edition of the 'Colorado Paper'.

Preamble

> The subject matter …is not that collection of solid, static objects extended in space but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are. [2]

If not yet exactly established as a profession there is a job widely described as playworker; that is, a person who works with children in the expansion of their potential to explore and experience through play. Out of a curious hotchpotch of philosophies, writings and findings there has existed – if not exactly thrived – this separate and particular discipline in the United Kingdom. Behind it is a movement which concludes that play has great importance for the development of the young child. Until the more recent and increasingly compelling appetite to have play incorporated into care situations, this movement centred around the choices of the child for content and containment. Provision was focused on the child's desire or drive to play. The central ethos was that the children themselves made the decisions about what and where they played and for how long. The adults who staffed these centres acted as resources for this self-directed play.

The perspective that we outline in this paper is arrived at from this particular working context; that is, playwork as it is understood in the UK within, particularly, adventure playgrounds, as secure, boundaried spaces where children choose and order their own playing. Here, the job of the playworker might be described, to be brief, as 'freely associating in the free association of children.'

We suggest, that in an environment where the natural space for play (both physical and psychic) is steadily being eroded, where the playful habitat – or more widely what we describe as the *ludic ecology* – is being curtailed or contaminated, we see increasing signs of breakdown and dis-ease. In response, playsites are coming to serve as 'authorised' grounds for children's play. Here, the work of the adult in playgrounds is required to fulfil a more curative function than has hitherto been acknowledged. It is from this new viewpoint that we suggest that playspace should now be seen as *therapeutic space* and playwork advanced as having an unexplored, healing potential.

Introduction

> There are two ways of doing injury to mankind: one, the introduction of pains; the other, exclusion of pleasures. Both are acts of tyranny, for in what does tyranny consist, if not in this?
>
> Jeremy Bentham [3]

In our opinion, the position of playwork in the United Kingdom at present is fraught. Playwork has failed to flourish for the following reasons:

- our inability to constitute the functions of playwork as a widely accepted discipline
- our failure to carry off any kind of successful campaign or political lobby
- the rise of playcare as a solution to the social problem of the working parent and the resulting impact on slender resources for play
- and the inability of the field itself to take on and advance the movement through meaningful research and development.

The idea of adventure play is under serious challenge, and with it all that the open accessibility ethos meant to our ideas on play. What was a widespread and (at least in London) an organisationally cohesive entity, has become disparate and fragmented. Adventure play – and its ideals, they merit such a description – has come to be seen as a discipline that is out of place and out of tune.

Work in play is increasingly presented in the forms emerging out of playcare practice and is based on early year's education. As the ideological basis of playcare is often constructed in the arguments of adult convenience, rather than in the child's essential developmental processes, this has meant a considerable shift in practice. The underpinning philosophical thesis for this shift is conveniently ignored.

However, playwork has been unable to offer an alternative to playcare's justification in terms of social need. This is because playwork has little or no convincing theoretical base to argue its own case for developmental contribution. Social pressures have allowed for it to be easily co-opted into the growing domain of playcare, resulting in playwork provision and especially open access practice steadily being diminished.

The outcome for playwork has been a retreat into more concrete forms of work and the need to identify with some other profession for comfort. A number of playworkers have come to consider 'professional' status as being a cover for the field's lack of authority and esteem. Ideas of play, in the current view, are best couched safely in terms of other, more respected professions (the teacher, the social worker and so on), not out of our own experience. Playwork has drifted into a kind of inauthentic voice; this may account for the difficulty of translating 'what we know into what we say'. In contrast to this, we must note a certain maturity in the discipline itself seeking to establish real purpose and meaning for play work. However these comments are whispered asides compared to the loud voices of the 'play programme' and 'practical frameworks' active in the field.

Broadly speaking, in playwork, there appear to be two schools of thought: those who see the practice as having worth solely in soft forms of social control (what Foucault termed 'the means of correct training'), and those who wish to move deeper into comprehending what our contact with children at play might mean. That is, a recognition of play as having a *child-ordinated, healing potentiality* with which we work. It is this notion, that we attempt here to explain and develop, and which, we argue, should more fittingly form playwork's manifesto.

The application

> Beyond its role in emotional regulation, self-soothing, arousal, and formation of neurosis and even character, fantasy can act as a rehearsal for future action and can provide a template for life choices that may be either literal translations (enactments) or symbolic expressions of the fantasy's narrative content. Fantasy is a theatre in which we preview the possible scenarios of our life to come. [4]

Many with whom we have discussed the content of this paper and its underlying propositions have seen the introduction of therapeutic ideas into the playwork approach as at odds with one of its stated aims, that is, child ordinated activity. We refute this. Much of the application discussed here is based directly, on and out of, our working practices as long-time playworkers, managers and policy makers. What we suggest here is not a departure from the first principles of playwork but rather a return to them. We simply point to a more transcendent means of working, and as an inevitable consequence, playwork is described in new forms with a new vocabulary. We contend, however, that we are merely articulating what many playworkers have felt to be the essential exchanges of their work. We have only attempted to state these in more precise terms.

Everyone working in play may have to face the fact that the idea of playwork is undergoing change. We argue that there exists the potential for it to degenerate into types of 'soft policing'. Although couched in terms of a return to the original ideas of play and playwork, what we go on to outline needs to be understood in a more radical and diagnostic form. We regard this as a more reflective, contemplative, kind of working. We offer the following 'explanation sketch' as the first provisional explication of the idea of a more therapeutic approach to playspaces, and to playwork practice, with an emphasis on its ameliorating or healing potential.

Accordingly, we have placed the movement and actions of play into a more systematic application. In this structure, the various forms (or matrices) serve the function of amplifying the content of the play exchange, setting, or artefact, better to explore its deeper meaning, within a series of levels helping judgement and interpretation. This entire construct, and the overall approach that emerges, views play practice from a more interpretative and analytic perspective. A generalised proposition that might more properly be termed *psycholudics*, the study of the mind or psyche at play.

Essentially, each identification or construct functions as an initiating 'stepping off point' into a more symbolic understanding of play. This is an understanding that the playworker is required themselves to elaborate in their practice. Our thesis rests on one essential proposition; that before and prior to each act of creativity of the child lies an imaginal realm or zone that is playful (*ludic*) and symbolically constituted. The playworker joins and works with this zone of *emergent material* and content. The practice is not a reductive response to the play acts and settings observed; it is not trying to control or manage the material or action. It does rest in the richness of response or 'ecstasy of variety' that a play exchange, setting or artefact generates. This is the proper measurement of the inherent play values of our methods and work.
The consequence of all this, is that in the play encounter, the drive active in the play setting (or stage, frame, playground, in the toy, artefact, game, ritual, rite) is contained and reflects, or is reflected back, to the child or player. This containment and the resulting boundary (or frame) 'holds' the meaning or intentionality of the child's play; that is, the environment or the worker gives some answer to the question the child has issued. This space is, in essence, the platform for the symbolic forms of 'stadial' development that the child is expressing, and which we, as playworkers, may be asked to acknowledge *with*, and on occasion, *for* them. Out of this material, it is possible for the playworker to develop insights and interpretative responses aiding further, and perhaps deepening, expression of this *ludic content*. When recognition of this issue and response fails, when the cycle becomes hybrid, when the containment breaks or ruptures, we get forms of *dysplay* – driven play material will out anyhow – taking over.

Is the hybrid maladapted play cycle, the kernel of neurosis? If almost all psychologies of depth, or therapies, are the archaeology, or the 're-playing' of neurosis formed in childhood, we might argue that the playworker is active at the *precise point* where potential neuroses are being formed. We therefore ask the following questions: might playworkers enable the 'playing out' of actual neurotic formation as a basic element of our practice? Could playwork be seen as being curative? Our responses to these questions form the core of this paper.

The setting

> When otherness is disavowed by the psyche, we are truly in the Theatre of the Impossible, but since the play cannot go on stage without the complicity and credence of others who are not mere inventions of the subject's imagination (even if they are treated as such), the whole performance is also under the sway of external reality and thus is subject to the limitations of the Possible. [5]

The setting or background we discuss is largely that of the playworker who is active – that is, themselves *freely associating, in the free associations of children*. This form of play is most redolent of the principles of playwork as practised in adventure playgrounds in the United Kingdom (though there are numerous other applications that we will not explore in this paper). This having been accepted, we propose that in the various containments of the playground and particularly, the more intimate and subtle 'frames' of their play and games,

children will produce or engage with the same material generated in the frame of analysis or therapy. By this we mean unconscious imagery, motifs and symbolic substance. This we see as the fundamental working material of a therapeutic playwork practice.

Playworkers are, in effect, engaging with both (i), an obvious and manifest level of playing and (ii), a deeper more latent layer of unconscious, but now emerging, content. This, in essence, suggests that the playworker is active in the same potent area of psychodynamic effects as therapists or analysts. Indeed we go further. We suggest that the playworker may well be immersed (and for greater periods of duration and time) in the very medium that therapists and analysts exploit in their therapeutic endeavours without accounting for this in terms of our practice. In playwork, we are in contact with material to do with the emotional and affective expression of the child's life-world and identity. But, in current descriptions of our work as in the 'coming-to-consciousness' expression of the playing child, we ourselves are, at least with regard to our practice, operating unconsciously.

We can think of no greater barrier to the deepening of our work than this unexplored dimension. The concepts we go on to discuss go some way to addressing this lack. To this end, we have examined the fields of the depth psychologies for some of the material we discuss here. In general, we are in accord with Adler when he said:

> The manner in which a child approaches a game, his choice and the importance he places on it, indicate his attitude and relationship to his environment and how he's related to his fellow man. [6]

Some conceptual considerations on play and the ludic

> All of these theories seem to have some validity, but we are still awaiting an elegant, unifying 'grand' theory, of play that integrates all its positive qualities. [7]

It is a commonplace in various texts on the subject to read that play has some essence that is hard to define, some ineffable quality. The encounter with the phenomena of play appears to shape a desire to explore indescribable *qualia*, inspiring both heartfelt eulogy and massive evasion from playworkers. Somehow, humankind's drive to play – the Sanskrit idea of *lila* captures this most closely, play as divine; seen in the urge to invent, to create – is set aside for more routine or mundane matters.

For the first part, this evasion can be seen in the denial of this desire, or this drive, as being an attendant part of our existential idea of maturation. In short, that we have come to operate in a 'conceptual straight-jacket' in understanding play and its role and function in human development. In an urge to educate our children to face a future we can only fearfully intuit, we adulterate an area that the authors choose to describe as a *ludic ecology*. It is this ludic habitat, at the most internalised of levels, that we are unwittingly polluting. The cost may be seen in our inability to recognise the transcendent possibilities of playwork.

Stanislav Grof reminds us that:

> Inner transformation can be achieved only through individual determination, focused effort, and personal responsibility. Any plans to change the situation in the world are of problematic value, unless they include a systematic effort to change the human condition that has created the crisis. To the extent to which evolutionary change in consciousness is a vital prerequisite for the future of the world, the outcome of this process depends on the initiative of each of us. [8]

By means of this paper, we attempt to outline an idea of play and the ludic within a new paradigm. We suggest that the purpose of play is precisely in what might be termed a *consciousness*, seen, as Pierce has it, as the 'behaviour of behaviours.' Or as an awareness that is the prefiguring (but always present) element of all creativity. We propose that this ground consciousness is the source of all mental health and well being and that it should be viewed as a particular, *ludic ecology*. In this place lies a means of healing trauma, neurosis and psychic ill through play.

The playwork schema that follows rests on an understanding of play as being a drive active in a *frame* of a particular nature. This frame is the stage or setting that offers the important containment and return for the child's *issued driven material, cues and themes*. In this frame, the play drive seeks and requires accommodation, both physical and non-physical, and reflection, in the sense of a mirroring back – a *return* as we put it – to be enacted. It suggests that some elements of the play setting or playground's function will be compensatory for, and contributory to, the emotional equilibrium of the child. It further suggests that at the deeper levels of functioning, the child will be expressing, in symbolic form, unconscious material crucial to their psychic development that will also require containment, reflection and return and thoughtful engagement by the involved playworker.

In this compact, the task of the playworker may be to consider and develop an interpretative or analytic perspective out of which to issue their responses. From this pattern of issue and return the playworker can provide some counterpoise in the constituent life-world of the child. It is the consistent operation of this response that most clearly marks the work of the playworker. The constructs we go on to explicate attempt to place this reflective response into a framework as an aid to the playworker active in this delicate area of operation.

Some definitional background

> The aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein [9]

As an aid to understanding, we suggest a series of propositions that underpin our approach to playwork. In this application, the practice is seen from a deeper more interpretative, perhaps analytical perspective. We concentrate on the more tactical and technical aspects of the interchanges of play, *the interplay*

phenomena, those that happen within the interpersonal, emotional affects of the work, rather than evaluations of the more physical or concrete elements of the site, setting and practice. (These are already well considered, and we would refer interested parties to the many publications that have covered this important aspect of the task. For example, see Hughes, A Question of Quality, 1996, and others.)

What follows here is not to do with those manifest elements of play work but with what we see as its more latent and underlying phenomena; the aspects of the *ludic*, its non-physical or psychic dimensions, rather than the physical aspects of play practice. To begin.

The play process:

The cyclic processes of play are often referred to but have not been set into a coherent formulation; the most common descriptions adhere to simple explanations of cycles of creation and destruction. These need to be considerably enlarged. We propose the following formula as being a more accurate rendition of the looping cycle of play, seen and understood as a drive. For our purposes, the play process has four, key, functional components.

These are:

M-L: the meta-lude; from which the drive or cue to play is issued to the environment.

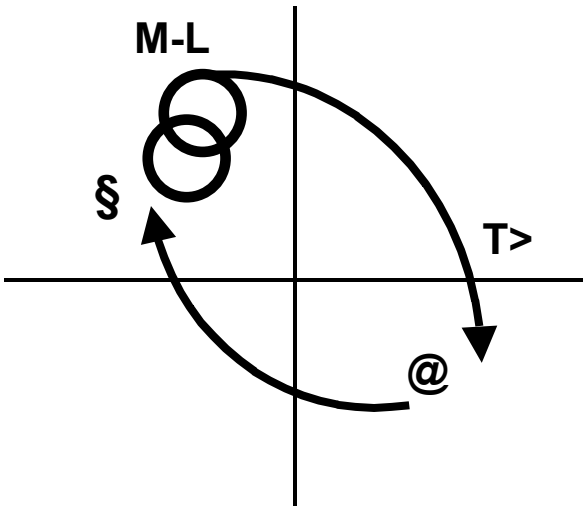
T>: the termination or decay; the breakdown of this drive over time.

@: the active development; the response to the play cue by the environment or another player.

§: the loop and flow; the response is picked up, processed and acted on in the metaludic space.

The resulting formula expresses the ludic cycle (**L**) – thus:

L = (M-L. T>. @. §), where if **@** or **§** are absent the cycle ends.



The essential task of the playworker is to be in service of this process as it unfolds **M-L**, decays **T>**, or is developed **@** in the playing child. Playwork actions and interventions can be understood and perfected around an essential understanding of the various phases of this *ludic cycle* with appropriate readings and responses being established. To steal a march on a later and fuller explanation, the playworker must 'co-operate intelligently' with the cyclic, playing processes of the child or children.

The play drive or ludido – (after Sturrock 1993, and Sturrock and Rennie 1995/97)

> The chimpanzee used the stone much as a child uses the transitional object. This… suggests that primates other than humans engage in some forms of symbolic play. Taken together with other disparate pieces of evidence, …we might infer that we are born with a propensity, instinct, or drive to play. [10]

This derivation sees the play function as a basic biological drive. We know that all mammals and many animals play. Play therefore is more than simply a behaviour; rather there is a deeper motivation serving biological and existential purposes. The driven energy of play is not just expended or spent, it is effectively an issue and response, ludic, feedback loop. For our means, the essential cycle can be discerned in the cues that the child issues to the surrounding environment, objects and others and the returning material that they compose in the play frame. It is more than a mere rehearsal for adulthood – this is to diminish and adulterate its purpose – it is instead a series of playful investigations that form the life-world of the child and their sense of identity and self. Russell Meares writes:

> The pole of consciousness that James called the *I*, moved the contents of consciousness about in an associative or combinatory play. A very important implication of this description is that consciousness is not merely passive, a simple searchlight, but active. [11]

We suggest, as a distinct playwork definition, that the *ludido*, the play drive, could be precisely seen as the active agency of an evolving consciousness – such a description is closer to the definitions out of eastern psychologies and traditions, the lila principle – in what we call a 'field' or psychic, ludic ecology.

Metalude:

We see this formulation as one of the most intangible but important areas of the working practice of the playing children and the adult/practitioner active in that play. As it is crucial to what follows we provide a lengthy description of its relevance and validity to our task. We draw on much of the work of Winnicott and a number of other analysts and therapists for the essential construction of our thesis, but feel it important to state that the reference point, for the main part, is out of our direct experience of playwork practice. Winnicott himself provides the justification. He said:

> I am reaching towards a new statement of playing, and it interests me when I seem to see in the psychoanalytic literature the lack of a useful statement on the subject of play. Child analysis of whatever school is built around the child's playing, and it would be rather strange if we were to find that in order to get a good statement about playing we have to go to those who have written on the subject who are not analysts. [12]

We take up the challenge. A part of the play drive or ludido is sustained in a deeply internalised form of fantasy play, which we observed from our play practice, and that we have confirmed out of our work in play practice and in therapies. This internalised zone is variously described, most notably by Winnicott, who called it the 'third area' and 'the potential space'. He invested it principally with qualities from his psychoanalytic, object relations, perspective.

To differentiate and to acknowledge some of the functionality ascribed from out of eastern psychological practices, where play, or *lila*, could be seen as being 'the divine diversion or play of appearances dreamed up by the gods for their amusement' – we might be talking of the gods appearing in the frame of the child's play – we describe it as a distinct and operative zone profoundly relevant to our working method. One of the authors of this paper saw this *metalude* as a higher form of play. It is the source point and beginning of the function of *internalised gestalt formation* within the play process already outlined.

Children at play engage in the production and sharing of *internalised gestalts*; they are 'alive in the moment', with no concern for the past or future. Playworkers discern these gestalts through experiential insight; they *feel* them, even if the external, physical evidence is slight. The encounter of the child and the adult in any play setting involves, in part, an overlapping of this gestalted material. In some cases, the child's and the playworker's effects become merged to form a new intrasubjective identity; a ludic third, or a *gestalted mutuality*. This is when people play together and 'get lost' in their play. These formations first appear in what we call the *metaludic* space of play. (This can also be the case with a group where there would be a collective, overlapping mutuality, the point being that the 'getting lost' is expanded to the group.) Playwork practice

may require an involvement sensitised to contact with this subtle emerging material and its issuing centre.

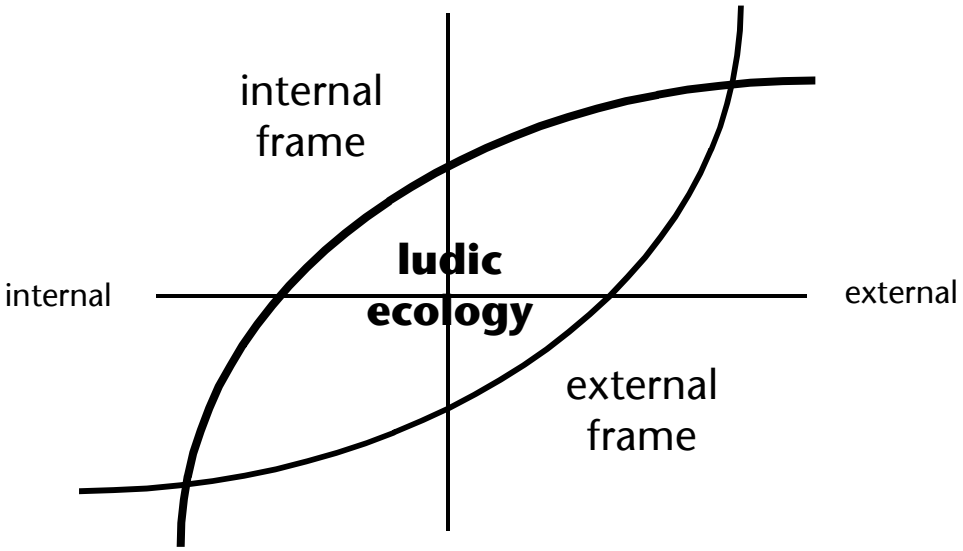
Recent developments in psychoanalytic discourse suggest this 'centre' as being the source of all curative, therapeutic outcomes. A cure or healing, that therapists steadfastly maintain is constituted in their own interpretative practice, Freudian, Kleinian, or whatever. We suggest that it is act of playing that has the healing inherent in it. A point to which we will return later.

The ludic ecology:

Current descriptions of the life-world and development of identity and self – the Heideggerian notion of *dasein*, self-being, has some relevance – have not been fully appreciated by the playwork discipline. Neither have they begun, as yet, to influence our disciplinary discourse. We offer the construction of the psychic, ludic ecology as a first tentative translation of some of these ideas into our practice. Meares points out the nature of this locus:

> The play of the very young child has peculiar characteristics that include the relationship with the other, the form of language, and an absorption in the activity that is similar to that of an adult who is lost in thought. The field of play is where, to a large extent, a sense of self is generated. [13]

This *field* is the ethereal stage, the play frame, the potential space, that incorporates *internal* symbolic representations and *external* artefacts, objects and others; these serve to mirror and reflect the internalised drama or narrative. This stage can be seen as the psychic dimension of the child's playing eco-system. The resulting formation is in a direct and communicating relationship with their environmental surroundings. It is at the precise point of this encounter, the internalised play space of the child and its meeting with the external world, that the playworker sits poised. It is the 'field' of this internalised play, its throw or overlap with that of other children and that of the attendant playworker, in concert with the reflective, containment of the artefact, object, play frame and site, that composes the *ludic ecology*. This is not a solid formation, it is rather a fluid and supple projection. The developing child's playful sense of self and identity is neither yet fixed nor bound by the soma or body form. Identity (and its lack!) does not end at the skin. Rather it is a mobile, flexible extension, where options, ideas, themes, change and adapt in contact with the surrounding, and containing, environment.



Much can be interpreted from the child's exploitation of external play objects, in conjunction with themes, magic or mythic material, and narrative constructs coming out of this delicate internal zone. This interplay we propose should be seen as a *ludic consciousness*, Edith Cobb, describes it thus:

> The child's urge to 'body forth the forms of things unknown' in the microcosm of child art and play bears a distinct resemblance to the morphogenesis characteristic of nature's long-term history, namely, evolution. [14]

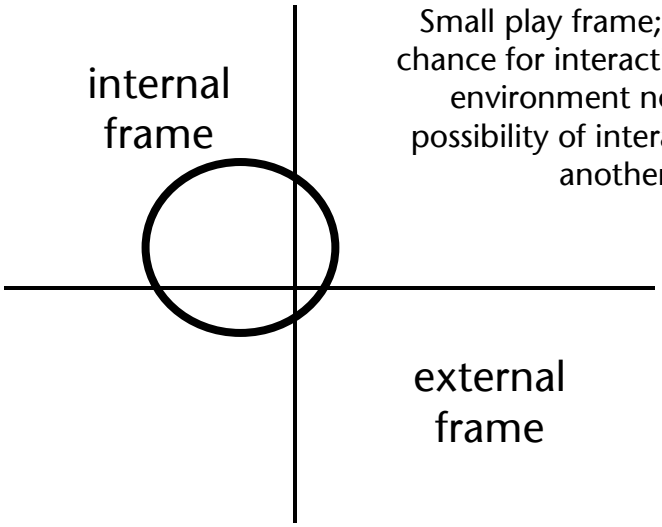
To further extend the metaphor, we might perceive the child's play universe and the meeting with the external world as a flexible, holistic and ludic process. This totality we see as being a psychic, non-physical, ludic ecology. By 'reading' the inherent encounter and the subsequent balancing, the resulting adaption and adjustment processes, we as playworkers can contribute to the child's development in a way that is child-centred, and encourage the self-healing potentials of play to take effect.

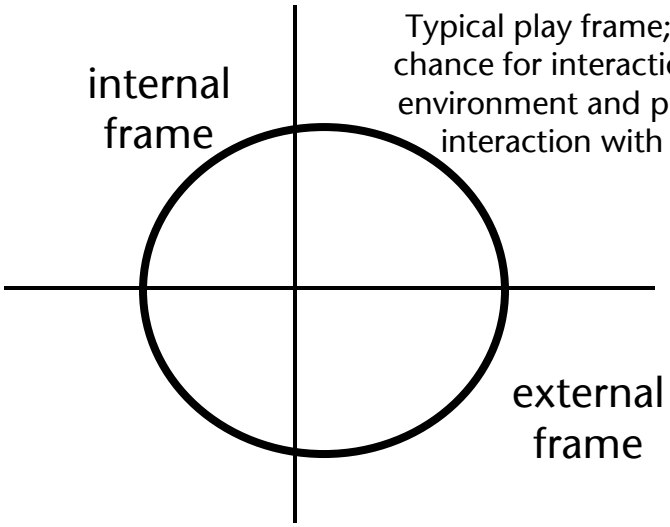
The play frame:

Within the generalised summaries of playwork, there are well considered and articulated descriptions of some of the play frames that the child encounters. These have tended to be concerned with the physical aspects of the playground and play setting. There are, however, any numbers of subtle overlapping frames occurring simultaneously, to which the playworker must be sensitive. These frames are not physical but are projected or 'thrown' fantasy.

They can extend from the tiniest and most intimate, encompassing the child in some internalised reverie, lost in thought, daydreaming, to groups of children ranging across the wide open spaces of some of our larger playgrounds, where the entire space is the frame of the play. There will also be some overlap in terms of content, different groupings made up of players, happening across themes, games, narratives and so on, to fantasy constructs shared by small

groups where the play is effectively virtual. The duration of these frames can be literally seconds to many weeks, even months. The frame will last as long as it has relevance and meaning for the projected play form of the child.





The most important function of the frame is that it provides the context or stage where the play form is enacted. The *play frame* is the holding limitation or boundary for the projected ludic material of the child's play. It is, in effect, the enclosure for their imaginal expression. It is chosen and initiated by the child and is a retainer for meaning and is a reflective vehicle for this meaning. It has a functional requirement to provide return. The play frame becomes ineffective, ruptured or decayed, when it can no longer offer this return. Arnold Modell, describes this contradictory necessity, thus:

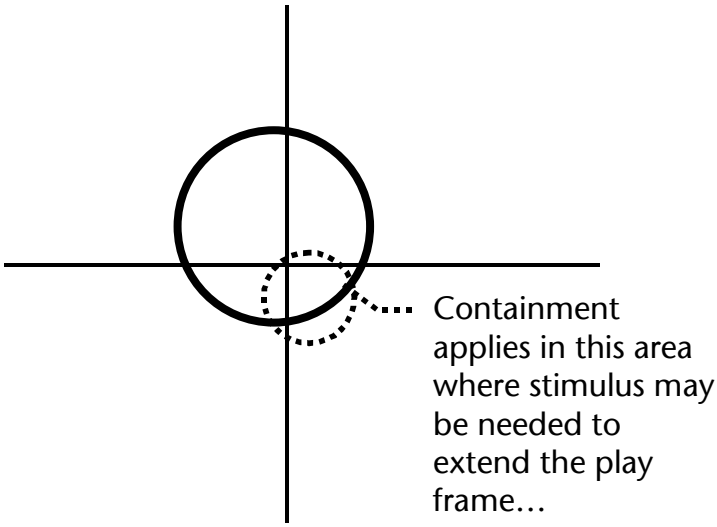
> Ritualised rules of the game demarcate or frame a reality that is separated from that of ordinary life. This not something that Winnicott wrote about; but his theory of playing illustrates a profound paradoxical truth: That the freedom of play – that is, the freedom to create – exists *only by means of constraint*. [15] (our italics)

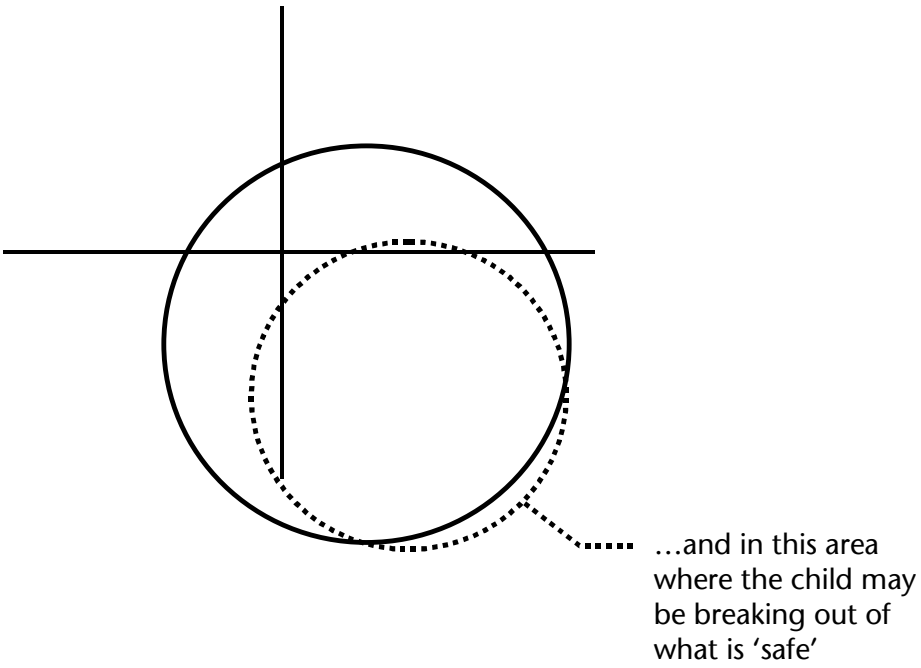
The play frame could therefore be viewed as a child initiated, non-material, constraint or boundary that helps define and give meaning to play content.

Containment:

> Heidegger explicitly rejects the idea of freedom as "a free floating arbitrariness," insisting that we can understand "freedom in its finitude" only if we see that "proving boundedness" does not impair freedom. [16]

As a necessary distinction, the frame is the play boundary of the child. *Containment* is the 'holding' function of the playworker. If the play frame is the narrative thread, the theme, activity or game, that the child uses to bound their idea or notion of play, the playworker's responsive task is the crucial provision of containment. Again, this has largely been understood as being referenced to the purely physical aspects of the work, the site as a container, and has been taken to an extreme in playcare with content and programme provided by the adult. Our proposition is a greatly enlarged idea akin to Winnicott's notion of the 'holding' environment.





This is not the place to examine this idea fully, but, from observations of our own playwork experiences and those of others, we suggest that the play drive will, from time to time, need a holding or containing environment. This is particularly necessary during specific phases in the ludic loop of playing, most crucially to prevent a descent into the de-constructive, destructive phase of playing, or at its completed annihilation; that is, when the play value of a frame or theme is spent. (As a further aside, we also suggest that Winnicott's idea of the 'transitional object' has wider implications than simply as a descriptive dimension of solely an infant's behaviour. It may be that there is a process of 'transitional objectifying' that could be seen as the trigger or signal, a play cue, of such a breach occurring, a reaching out of the established frame. In adult or mature areas of life, this may signify movements of transition or transcendence to higher states of consciousness. The rehearsal quality of play may be the developing acceptance of the termination of well-used but redundant concepts.)

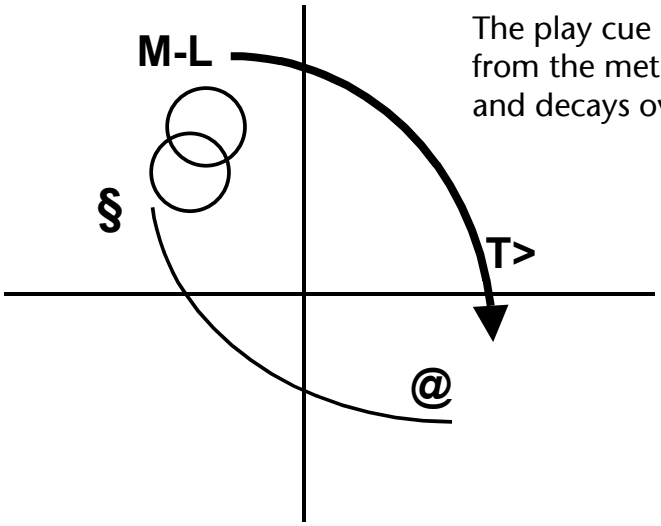
In containment, the playworker maintains the reflective integrity of the 'play frame' of the child. The task is in *recognising and preserving* the meaning of the play *at that time*. At some point, containment may alter when the attendant playworker, 'reading' the playful exchanges of the child, will enter the interrupted, decayed, disrupted cycle of play, and 'hold' or 're-frame' the play form with the children. Obviously, this is a delicate and sensitive task and open to many kinds of adulteration, but it is one we see as being central to the judgement and skills of playwork practice.

For example, it might most clearly be the case when the play frame has been prematurely terminated by external cessation, where play begins to reform into rules, where the play may need some ritual or rite, or celebratory elaboration to 'fix' the meaning. It is precisely a 'boundedness' that is 'proved' by the playing child's 'freedom' to use and discard it momentarily, without the playworker being discomfited by this apparent paradox.
The ludic feedback cycle has a natural form of decay, that is the child tires of that form, has derived whatever they need from it and it is de-constructed and replaced by new forms. There is also an unnatural form where the play is terminated or interrupted by external events or circumstances. Seen in this latter context, one of the playworker's tasks may be to provide the means of containing the meaning of the child's play as the frame is re-formed, is re-constructed or re-framed. In effect, the playworker becomes *the holder of meaning* for the child for periods of time. If containment is neglected, or is set aside for the playworker's needs or their own unplayed out material, the play is contaminated or adulterated.

Play cues: (after Rennie and Sturrock [17])

Observations of the child at play from the very earliest days of life show that they issue series of subtle cues to the surrounding environment. Response is a necessity, the mother/child interactions being the original 'set' for this circulation. The *play cue* is the lure or invitation from the child to the surrounding environment to join in play productions of one sort or another. The playworker, when interacting with the child, albeit at later developmental

stages, is required to respond to these cues in a variety of ways. Understanding this process largely informs the intervention strategies we go on later to discuss.



The play cue is issued from the metalude and decays over time

If we conclude that play is a form of consciousness, the play cue is the signal for the world to engage with the child's developing sense of self and reality – 'things as they are'. From the responses or constructions thus generated, the child's formational life-world evolves. The notion of the self and world thus combining as an entity, seen as the 'integra', has some charm. This leads to our generalised proposition that the individual's sense of reality, their identity and idea of the self, the integra, are formed out of their play constructions. The play process is, accordingly, a vital part of human development. Sidoli and Davis, suggest the importance of the play constructed life-world when they say that:

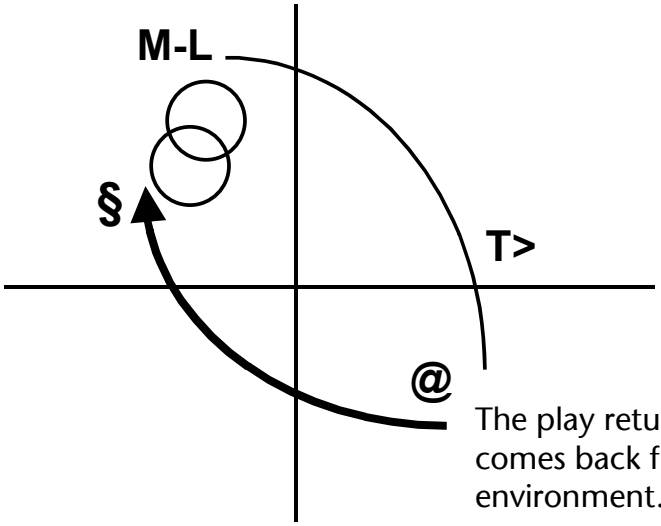
> Playing and pretending are like a halfway house between inner and outer reality. This leads on to play and to imagine a playground in the mind and on to the adult capacity to give the inner playing and imagery an outer form in terms of enriched work and living. It could be said that the quality of life depends on how far we are able to play out and live what is within us. [18]

As playwork has not attributed to the play process this level of potency, it is therefore vital that we reconsider the effects of intervention and involvement in the play of the child. Our very presence may have some impact throughout the cycle, but at some stages it becomes more critical than at others. In the earliest phases of the playing process, for example, after the period of decay, destruction or annihilation, the child is exposed and vulnerable while they issue play cues to enjoy the commencement of the next build up in the playing cycle. The cue may not be a positive prompt. It could be the issuance of emotion or anxiety. It may be seen as attention seeking or misbehaviour. The concerned playworker should be able to read and respond to all these cues in a manner appropriate to this interplay. Play cues are issued with the expectation of response or return and when this does not take place, frustration occurs; the play cycle can become corrupted or aberrant. It is this aberrant or hybrid cycle that is the source of *dysplay*.

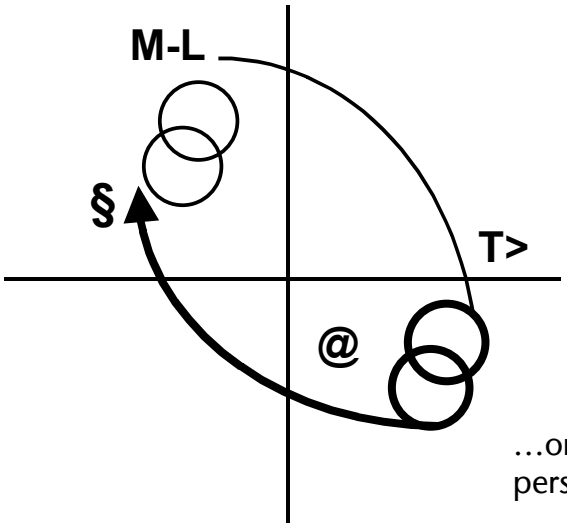
The issued play cues, the driven aspect of the child's play behaviour is not simply dissipated energy. It is a form of seeking, of issue and return, it is a feedback loop. For the greater part this cycle is self-supporting and ordinated. The regulatory influence of the playworker is therefore in attendance to the wider containing enclosures of play. The containment setting is variable, it can be a narrative, a theme, or a physical area, such as a den or hidden concealed space, that may need to be preserved or re-ordered so to as to offer the necessary return. On other occasions, the thread of play may require some strengthening or involvement. This might be the physical re-ordering of a setting, a metaphor, a narrative construct, a theme developed, an adjudication and so on. For example, the child may want to play 'cops and robbers'; the worker acts out the fantasy to complete the return. The seeking nature of the play cue may last from a moment to a month. The playworker must have a repertoire of responses to the play cue if they are to work effectively in the child's playspace.

Play return:

In existing playwork practice, there has been a necessary concentration on physical practicalities. This priority may need to be greatly enlarged. We contend that part of the playwork task is to evaluate the playground and all its artefacts in their potential to provide *return* for the child's play *intentions*. Are the structures, as well as offering challenge, designed and built so as to provide potential for intimacy, for concealment, can the children be 'hidden'? Is the art, the representations on the walls, surfaces, the colours, motifs, and the potential for meaning that they hold, properly considered? Are they iconic? Is there space for the child's own adaptions and contributions? Is the play fruitful and fulfilling; is the full expression of the play cycle being met? Are the meanings that the children seek capable of being held and developed by the staff? Are the workers able to amplify this meaning? Are the 'meanings' that emerge from the children's play their own and not those of the staff?



The play return comes back from the environment…



…or from another person's metalude

There can be no absolute description for effective play return. It is a condition that will always be in flux and movement. That only means that we, as part of our working practice, should develop an awareness of its continuance, being able to form, *moment to moment*, judgements about our involvement in the play cycle. All these statements are undoubtedly abstract. It can, however, be appreciated in the general ambience of the playground or play site and in the expectations of the children who elect to show up day-to-day. The final word might be left to Miles Davis as a kind of aphoristic consideration for our task. He said:

> Don't play what's there, play what's not there. [19]

Dysplay:

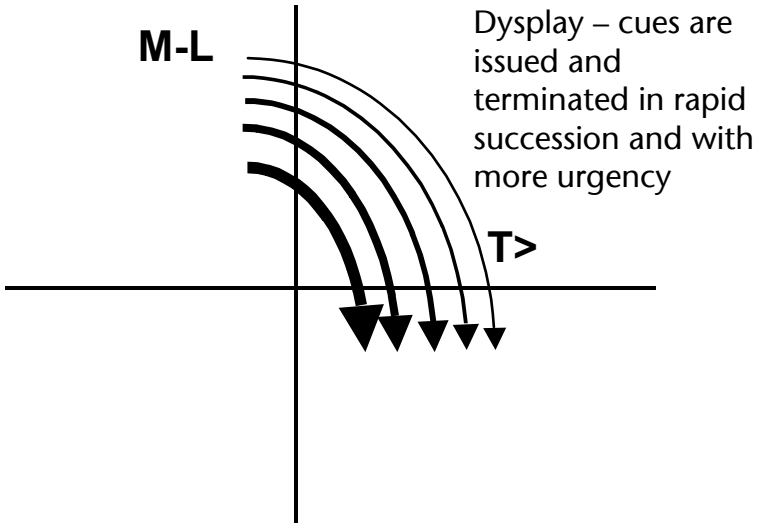
> Example of child X
>
> He always starts well, comes in good form. He gets bored, has a short attention span. He finds it difficult to wait to get involved in a game etc.
>
> When he flips without warning
> He hits other children
> Uses bad language
> Steals
>
> There is one boy he gets on especially badly with. He spends a lot of time on his own. [20]

Where the cycle of play is greatly disturbed, terminated or contaminated, where the child, for whatever reason, is 'stuck' in one or other of the play loop's operative contexts, there is the possibility of dysfunctional or hybrid forms of play beginning to emerge. We term this *dysplay*. In essence, the child or the group of children are unable, for whatever reason, to play out, fully to express the meaning of their particular play. The full cycle of play is not being engaged. The play process can be used as a diagnostic tool where this dysplay can be

observed. We cite one potentially controversial example of our formula being applied here.

There is a myth of the hyperactive or ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) child being advanced. in response, we offer an assessment based on the methodologies thus far advanced.

The hyperactive child is stuck in the metaludic/annihilation (M-L. T>) phase of the ludic cycle, in what we term a 'hybrid' or 'false' cycle. They issue play cues to the containing environment as indicators of their commencing internalised gestalts. These are not picked up in the time the child allows. The return cannot be framed, and either merely dissipates or prematurely returns and is annihilated. The child re-issues the cues, now laden with increasing anxiety. These then repel the possibility of shared gestalt (because other children or the worker sense that something is 'wrong' and do not play), and return to annihilation (T>), before the internalised gestalt can be fully, or meaningfully explored. The complete play cycle is truncated and the whole activity becomes speeded up.



Our experience shows that intervention by a sensitive playworker, where the so-called ADD child, assured that the cues were being understood and responded to, were able to frame their play and the emergent gestalts of the third phase, projective action (@), were entered into. They then enacted through the loop and flow (§), the full play cycle. As an almost immediate result, the firing off of cues, the hyperactivity, slowed down and adjusted to normal periodicity.

This application discusses only one possibility but there are any numbers of other examples that may be appropriate. Playworkers should be able to use the play cycle to underpin their understanding of the play process and accordingly make their interventions and judgements within these referential frameworks. But there remains a general point to be made about the efficacy of playwork in its encounter with unplayed out or unexpressed material that may go on, in our theoretical stance, to effect the core of neurotic formation.

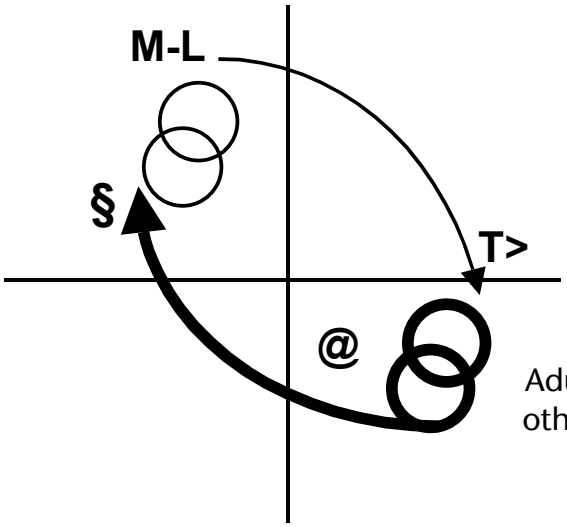
In the interim we pose the following questions – given what we have said, and go on to say about the play habitat and ecology – should the issue of

ADD/hyperactivity, be regarded as dysplay and as a problem of the ludic environment? Could the insights of playworkers be applied to a more widely understood neurotic dysfunction with ameliorating results?

Adulteration:

> One does not dream with taught ideas
>
> Gaston Bachelard. [21]

Due to one of the key elements of the play interchange (that is, the entry of the adult into a *gestalt mutuality*, the shared space of the narrative, theme, idea, shape, rules, games and constructs, of the child or group of children at play), the adult enjoys certain power and privilege. This is conferred by status, position, experience, authority, culture, size and society. A crucial element of the work of the playworker is the recognition of this dominion in the reflective continuum of play practice. There is a danger that the play aims and objects of the children become contaminated by, either the wishes of the adult in an urge to 'teach' or 'educate', simply to dominate, or by the worker's own unplayed out material. This latter, subtle and invidious form needs to be discussed. The attraction to many of the work may be that they have, themselves, *unworked out play material* that they feel impelled to express. This was certainly the case in our own experience. Here the frame of the child's play comes to focus on the unplayed out material of the playworker's own history and past, the children solely bit players, second bananas, on the stage of the playworker's drama or narrative.



Adulteration – the other's play return is the more dominant

There is a danger of a multifold contamination in this situation. On adventure playgrounds we can see it in the grandiose structures built by some workers that become 'too good to play on,' their pristine preservation overriding the de-constructive aspects of the play cycle. Or, more abstractly, where the play themes or narratives are presented solely by the workers. A further adulteration is evident in the form of 'infantile toxicity'. Here the playworker becomes drawn into the child's play frame and becomes over-involved in the play. It can be seen in squabbling over 'turns', physically dominating or competing, over-complex rules, resistance to the decay of a play form and so on. Containment is neglected. The adult stands directly in the play frame. A reversal has taken place; the children now contain the play frame

of adult practitioner. Where this occurs the frame of the child's play is entirely polluted by the playworker's conscious or unconscious wishes and desires.

Part of the work practice should therefore concentrate on the emotional and affective modulations that exposure to extended contact with the higher metaludic exchanges of the play process involve and the danger of potential adulteration. The playwork group as a matter of normal course should accept that they are required to use each other as a team to reflect on, analyse and evaluate, interplay exchanges in general – and in particular, where they see contamination beginning to appear. It is not bad that these phenomena can occur; it is, if we do not place them in the context of mature, corrective reflection. Containment for our practice is as important as it is for play!

Association and amplification:

> Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not playing into a state of being able to play. [22]

Should the playworker practice in what we maintain is a *reflective continuum*, then there is a need for a method that can follow the deepening of the play event into more empathic play experiences. We suggest a notion broadly borrowed from analytical psychology, namely,
association and amplification. Samuels, *et al*, describe its Jungian use, as:

> …part of Jung's method for interpretation (particularly of dreams). By way of *association* he tried to establish the personal context of the dream; by way of *amplification* he connected it with universal imagery. Amplification involves use of mythic, historical and cultural parallels in order to clarify and make ample the metaphorical content of dream symbolism… Jung speaks of this as "the psychological tissue' in which the image is embedded. [23] (our italics)

If the word 'dreams' is replaced by 'play' then the point of the quote becomes clearer. An element of the associative playwork task may be to 'make ample' the imagery, ideas and symbols of the child's enacted play. It is likely that these forms will extend well beyond the narrow cultural base upon which much present play practice is constituted. The playworker's immersion in this extended metaphoric range and the ability to enlarge it through amplification becomes a crucial component of good practice.

Most playgrounds are situated in areas where there are many cultures in place. The established idea of 'equal opportunity' in playwork has been only primitively understood and should be challenged. As an example, a playground could be seen to be meeting this need if it celebrates Diwali as a festival. Our own experience has shown that the play of children from the Indian sub-continent, Hindu and Muslim, uses images, ideas, metaphors, narratives and games that are born out of their particular culture and life-world. (The point we make here is universally applicable to children; we use these particular cultural

examples solely to illustrate the point of practice.) The need for containment and return may well reside in the amplification, through the particular culture, of the material being presented. If we fail to recognise this material or to terminate or contaminate it with overlaid Eurocentric content, we rupture both the frame and return needed for effective play.

It is legitimate that we can analytically interpret a situation, where a child may be representing through symbolic form, matters, images and aspects of their emerging consciousness. An understanding of this material adds to the ability of playworkers making judgements about play intervention and the content of the child's play. This approach may also have a significant import on the organisation of the environments within which we work with the children. It may, for example, permit us to evolve a more meaningful context for descriptions of equal opportunity than the necessary but limited protocols we have up till now developed. True equality of opportunity, certainly within the play context, lies in the fullest possible exploration of the child's developing consciousness through the various symbolic and mythic forms it may give utterance to, or create. The Hindu or Muslim child may well be playing out symbolic, and other material, which has in their own cultures been met by rites and rituals. Intuitively we have known this – by recruiting workers from similar cultures, we have helped in responding to the child's needs, cultural and symbolic. By extending our own knowledge, we are able to help children from all cultures with playful expression.

Authenticity:

> A new angelology of words is needed so that we may once again have faith in them. Without the inherence of the angel in the word – and angel means originally 'emissary,' 'message-bearer' – how can we utter anything but personal opinions, things made up in our subjective minds? How can anything of worth and soul be conveyed from one psyche to another, as in a conversation, a letter, or a book, if archetypal significances are not carried in the depth of our words? [24]

Directly out of the idea of association and amplification comes the need for the playworker to give some thought and consideration to the responses that they issue within the play frame. Here the adult practitioner does not stand as some representative of the community or society at large. They are more vitally individuals with a responsibility to speak accurately about their feelings, ideas, affects and vulnerabilities. The playing children will come to trust the 'truth' of these responses. The repertoire of response to the child at play from the attendant adult is dependent on the faithfulness of the adult's feelings at any given time, rather than adult platitudes.

It is, for example, legitimate to express feelings of anger or dismay over an act. Both the child and the playworker can continue in the knowledge that they are not 'liked' or even 'hated' from moment to moment. Winnicott's construction of the 'good enough' mother has useful currency for play practice. He discusses the paradox of this love/hate relationship – one that should also be our own – with his usual lack of mawkishness. About mothers and children, he said:

> Let me say quickly that I'm not talking about sentimentality. You know the kind of person who goes about saying. 'I simply adore babies.' But you wonder, do they love them? A mother's love is a pretty crude affair. There's possessiveness in it, there's appetite in it, there's a 'drat the kid' element in it, there's generosity in it, there's power in it, as well as humility. But sentimentality is outside it altogether and is repugnant to mothers. [25]

The corollary to this deepening of our practice, examining the affective modalities within which the work is carried out, means that we must consider the dynamics of the team operative in the play context. Playwork has up till now greatly underestimated the staff working group as the locus of psychodynamic potential. Here lies the setting for the containment of our own working practice. The group, through deliberative analysis of the children's play, and their individual and collaborative responses to it, can begin to provide the proper reflective continuum for the ongoing practice. It is out of this essential peer group interplay that the judgement and intervention considerations should be essayed. This is obviously a large point, that can only be sketched here, but we wish to highlight an aspect we hold to be crucial. There can be no immersion in the symbolic depths of play if the team are not themselves prepared, by education, training and disciplinary schooling, to enter into an exploration of their own counter-responsive attitudes and feelings about play content. The *authenticity* of the worker's responses is crucial to the care-giving elements of playwork practice – it is out of these abstract and intangible contributions that trusting relationships are built. It is this compact, trust between the staff, that is a major contributory factor.

Before and after play:

> The main idea which I acquired …which I found extremely stimulating, was to do with the part played both in neuroses and in ordinary living by a disturbance in the capacity for reflective thought, particularly in this area of the relation between reverie and directed thinking. [26]

The description of play that we begin to outline in this paper is definitionally structured in a more contemplative or meditative form. This is deliberate. There is a clear need for reflective periods both preceding play work, and afterwards, where the potential for the many kinds of interference with the 'emerging programme' and the child's space to play, both physical and psychic, can be discussed and dialogued. This period of free association about the nature of the playground's children is the continuance of the reflective method.

The position of the worker in the play of the child should be out of the most careful consideration of their influence, involvement and intervention. For these reasons, we see the pre and post play session briefing and de-briefing as being a crucial element of play practice. We may need to adhere to the ancient dictum of Anacharsis when he said: 'Play that you may be serious.' [27]

It is well understood that prior to the child's arrival at the play setting or site, that there will be some preparatory work ensuring the safety and security of the space at all levels. Up to now within playwork practice this preparation has been concerned solely with the physical aspects of the site, and is already well established. We make little comment about these elements within this paper. We are more concerned with other less tangible levels and interactions.

We propose that this existing preparatory and post-session range should be extended to consider certain themes, emotional acting-out, moods, created rituals, games or other constructed play forms, both physical and imaginal, with which the children have been absorbed. This could be seen as being a kind of meditative preliminary to engagement with the playing encounter to come. These sessions should allow staff to examine the catalogue of their own particular responses to the play themes, ideas and symbolism that occur. The amplification and associative richness of the playworker's responses, the potential for return, can be greatly enhanced by use of these sessions. In addition, there exists the necessary safe space, the group's trust and confidence in each other, for the more negative implications of the work to be aired.

All this naturally applies to the kind of reflective continuum that follows the play session. Presently, afterplay is normally considered to be extra-curricular to the main playwork task. We see it vital that it is considered as a crucial element of the job and, as such it should included as essential to the core practice. Both are as important as face-to-face work. To 'de-brief' from play with the child is a form of sanative cleansing for the playworker.

Understanding

> Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing
> I want to fill it with colour and ducks
> The zoo of the new
> Whose names you meditate…
> April snowdrop, Indian pipe,
> Little. [28]

The various forms that we advance within this paper should not be seen as being firm protocols or procedures for involvement. We would prefer that they act simply as a framework for what is the core of our activity; namely, to understand the play of the child, through contact with that play. This necessitates an acceptance of play as multiformed and as having depth and significance. Is the sense of play that we set out not to do with the developmental complexity of identity and self and all that that entails?

Might it not be a truism that in our playwork practice we provide a framework, the necessary, reflective containment, for the child as he or she expresses their hurts and highs, their dramas and delights? Are we not acting as the mediums for this expression, bringing perhaps the unthinkable into the light for it to be safely given life and played out? This element of our practice, could have significant parallels with the description that the psychiatrist, Stanislav Grof, offers, when he says:

> Whatever the nature and power of the technique used to activate the unconscious, the basic therapeutic strategy is the same: both the therapist and the client should *trust the wisdom of the client's organism more than their own intellectual judgement*. If they support the natural unfolding of the process and co-operate with it intelligently – without restrictions dictated by conventional conceptual, emotional, aesthetic, or ethical concerns – the resulting experience will automatically be healing in nature. [29] (our italics)

In the above statement if 'child' and 'playworker' replace the words 'client' and 'therapist' we arrive at a meaningful description of playwork. Material emerging, as it must, out of the unconscious of the child or children at play is not unformed, non-representative imagery. It can be seen to conform to a whole range of collective, mythic material that is transpersonally – that is across cultures and races – pertinent to our human developmental processes. Ken Wilber insists: "Development – or evolution – consists of a series of hierarchical transformations or unfoldings of the deep structures out of the ground unconscious." [30] The playworker sits, precisely, in connective relationship with the child's *ground consciousness*.

Part of the great task facing our discipline is to arrive at the point where the adult worker can address the essential exchanges of play 'without restrictions'. A kind of attending that can only be reached by extensive reflection on our pasts, our persons and our practice, what Grof means by 'co-operate with it intelligently'. Playwork, at any level, must come to terms with this form of endeavour as fundamental to our practice. It is within a web of relationships, of the most crucial, formative kind, where the work of play begins. It is in service of these tentative and difficult interactions that the dynamic processes of the work take shape. Playgrounds, playworkers and children, all interact to create containers of meaning for the playing child, moment-to-moment, day-to-day.

Some operative constructs: methods of involvement

> My nature is subdued to what it works in,
> like the dyer's hand.
>
> Shakespeare [31]

We offer the following precepts as a preliminary analysis of operative involvement in the play of the child or children. In general they can apply to both individuals and groups. They do not represent a taxonomy, a classification for play; rather they are a kind of reflective prompt for what should be a more generalised and wider contemplative stance on the acts and actions of playing.

Interventions themselves can be understood in the following hierarchy:

i) play maintenance:

> The children at play are absorbed in the acts or fantasies of play, the play is self-contained. The reading that applies will be of the traces that the children might leave, the drawings, created or used objects, toys, the resulting narratives, rules and rulings, rituals or rites. There is an

appreciation of content but minimal contact. The playworker is mindful of the frame and the overall containment aspects of the play and ensures that the play can continue without undue interruption, but is otherwise passive. There is no overlap of involvement in the play.

ii) simple involvement:

Following the issued play cues of the child, the adult acts as a resource for the play. This might include materials for the extension of expression, paints, clay, paper, brushes, tools, toys or some other hardware. The playworker serves solely and only in the supply elements of play. The playworker is mindful of the frame of the child's play, that is the most immediate area of their involvement, and that of their wider containment, but there is no overlap or other than a momentary involvement in the play as a material resource.

iii) medial intervention:

Following the issued play cues of the child, the playworker becomes involved in the essential structures of the play. The immediate frame of the child's play now includes the presence/ideas/wishes/ knowledge/authority and status of a playing adult. The playworker is reading this frame, and their involvement, at the same time as being a playing participant. This role requires a kind of duality of thinking where the worker is both active in the play and 'witnessing' the various enactments of the ongoing exchanges.

The underlying play strategy is one where the structure, that is the frame of play, is partially created by the worker and the children together. Once this most intangible but necessary frame is in place – it can 'hold' the imaginal play of the children – the worker can withdraw and once more attend primarily to containment. The timing and duration of this involvement should be sensitive to the need for this arrangement to be set in place. It is therefore crucial that the worker not be bound by a crude understanding of time but by the essential needs for secure space for play framing to occur. There is a direct overlap in the play of the playworker and the child.

iv) complex intervention:

In complex intervention, there is a direct and extended overlap between the playing child and the playworker. The forms of play, gestalts or otherwise, are shared and, though still functioning in the 'witnessing' position, the playworker is enmeshed in the interplay with the group or individual. The strategy within this form of play is the same as in medial play, but the clear judgement of the worker, in this context, is that the frame and the content of the play may involve complex material or expression and be of an extended nature. Again, the use of the term 'extended' does not refer solely to time or duration. The judgement of the worker is that the internalised, gestalted emergent forms of play merit their ongoing involvement. This 'call' is more pertinently to do with a reading of the play flow, the ludic process and the child's journey through that process, rather than termination or exit. The playworker is taking a measure of depth as much as passage.

> The crucial judgement that pertains is that the playworker is there to co-operate with the symbolic and other material that the children are issuing and expressing, helping them find a frame that can effectively hold the meaning of their play, with and for them. For the main part, the children will be able to do this for themselves. On occasion, however, the self-explorative exposure of hitherto unexpressed material or content may require the playworker to help its meaning to be fully played out.

The playworker could be seen to stand as the *mid-wife* to the child's play productions. For we must bear in mind that:

> The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect, but by the play-instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the object it loves; "…we know that every good idea and all creative work are the offspring of the imagination, and have their source in what one is pleased to call fantasy… the dynamic principle of fantasy is play." [32]

v) the integrity of intervention:

> The playworker may be involved in any number of disputed or conflicting frames, narratives, themes and games, and so on. The children themselves may be at a number of stages in the process, with the frame itself being contested by differing factions. There may be calls for rulings, settlements, or re-establishment of a theme that has been eroded, changed or forgotten. The worker may be dealing with individuals and groups of children who are different levels in their discrete play frames. There will be pressure on the worker's time and involvement. The lively actions of some may be mitigated by the need for quiet rapport with others. There may be an active collusion to 'test' or distract the worker.

Throughout the maelstrom of activity and demand, the playworker is making and issuing judgements. Though this has previously been tacitly acknowledged, currently there is no method or construction around which the playworker can perfect this methodology. The danger is that these judgements and the worker's involvement can drift into personal and localised subjectivities. The various frameworks we have outlined attempt to alleviate this tendency. They offer the proposition that the playworker can be *subjective* about the playing child and *objective* about their practice. They are not protocols or procedures – rather they should be seen as guideposts for the worker's presence in the play exchange.

The various methodologies we develop in this paper are intended to maintain the integrity of playworkers in their many onerous tasks. They are at work in a continuum of judgement and intervention beyond the scope of many other disciplines in terms of its potential for good or for harm. The playworker is present in the creation of the self, in work that is of the deepest psychological promise; and perhaps the soul of the child. A task we are required to re-think, just as Hillman, advises that we may be required to re-think psychological work more generally:

> If soul-making is not treatment, not therapy, not even a process of self-realisation but is essentially an imaginative activity of the imaginal realm as it plays through all of life everywhere and which does not need analyst or an analysis, then the professional is confronted with reflecting upon himself and his work. [33]

Conclusion

> Then out at last: the streets ring loud and gay,
> and in the big white squares the fountains play,
> and in the parks the world seems measureless,
> And to pass through it all in children's dress,
> with others, but quite otherwise than they…
>
> Rainer Maria Rilke [34]

In one of his sagest pronouncements, C. G. Jung, said, "the greatest sin is to be unconscious." Might we not say the same about the practice of playwork? Is there any other discipline, where vital questions about the medium within which the work is conducted, are so little asked, or so partially answered? Are we not operating without due care and attention being paid to the more hidden aspects of our task? Are playworkers actively involving themselves in the dynamic processes of the child's play without a real understanding of its inherent worth, or of the effects of their interventions? Might we not be, rather like the Idris Shah tale of the little fish who asks with some puzzlement of his mother, "What is this sea that everyone talks about?" Should playworkers now begin to reflect on the 'sea of play' in which we are all swimming?

So, we wish to suggest a puzzle, a kind of *koan* of play. (The koan is a statement from out of the traditions of Zen Buddhism that serves to distract the everyday workings of the mind, permitting new dimensions of understanding to emerge; 'what is the sound of one hand clapping', being one well known example.) Our koan seeks not to ask the question; 'what is play?' Rather we insist on a smaller more intimate question; namely, '*what is it that this play is*?' It is out of this question, gently posed of the playing child that the playwork task evolves.

Playworkers, in the play paradigm we have outlined, are required to work with myriad forms of play, from the grossest to the most subtle, with emergent, sometimes symbolic material. They work in a variety of interlocking frames, with an interrogative, self-questioning rigour, an extended consciousness of the ludic and the ability to respond from a wide metaphoric and narrative range. This might appear to be daunting were it not for the fact that much of this methodology exists in the 'tacit knowledge' of playwork. It is already much considered in the many extra-mural discussions that follow play sessions and is beginning to be seen in playwork discourse more generally. We have simply attempted to offer it some form and shape. Given what we perceive as being the state of play more widely, we feel it is of increasing importance that we do so.

We would argue that we need created playgrounds as the original and infinitely more rewarding natural grounds for play are being eradicated, contaminated or developed for adult purposes. The play habitat, physical and non-physical, is thoroughly adulterated. Nowadays, it must be recognised, when we provide a play environment we do so as a substitute provision. Playwork therefore functions within forms of containment that are artificial. And, if the argument is that playgrounds are unnatural (or compensatory), then it follows that we must make sure that the stuff that goes on within them, our day-to-day, adult, involvement, is as child centred and sensitised as we can manage. We need to acknowledge that we function within a *recreated* space – one that mirrors a deeper and more profound naturally occurring pastoral of the child at play in the environment.

The governance of this space, both physical and psychic, means, for the first part, that those involved in playwork must have deep insights into their own histories and habits. And, that we accept that the playground functions as a container of meaning for the playing child; meanings, which, from time to time, we may be required to interpret and decode out of these insights. We feel that the task of playwork requires us to operate in a continuum of judgement and intervention in what is a precious and internal ludic ecology; namely, that of the child at play. A methodology, or mode of practice, to which we have given too little attention, at a time when alternate designs that promote content interference in the play process, which may actually harm the child, are enjoying a certain credibility, it is appropriate to offer something other. Some of the internalised, fantasy material emerging out of a child's play may not fit into practice structured around programme, conditioning, or control, but it must be expressed!

It is perfectly acceptable to suggest that the child on the playground is an actor in an imaginal theatre of their own construction. Their passage through some of this ludic material will on occasion require a series of interventions and judgements by the playworker. If the child is in a cycle of play where the playworker sees some of the patterning we have described being enacted, where there may be the first signs of obsessive retentive play, it may be that a sympathetic ritual or rite can be enacted that will allow this passage to be safely negotiated. That this engagement can draw on a knowledge of myth, ethnography and anthropology, and some of the analytic, interpretative material, so abundantly available in the depth psychologies, seems to us to be route worth exploring. A field of knowledge with insights that could impact directly on that threshold area out of which we essay our judgement calls. Judgements, we reiterate, that playworkers are required to make in a context and continuum that is more onerous than almost any other profession. One that has a weighty contributory effect on the child's development and well-being.

The profound irony that holds might be that the play adventure is no longer simply in the physical risk but also, and perhaps more crucially, in psychic risk. We may be involved in supporting the child in undertaking arduous and difficult self-explorations or expressions with us in attendance. Ludic acts are played out in the containment of the play setting or playground where the

child re-inscribes unconscious content within new individuated, ecological constellations. The 'readings' that we are obliged to make of such playful enactments can be enhanced by our understanding of those themes and symbols, common across the developmental bands, that we encounter in our growing and evolving, human consciousness. That play should have a significance for ecological well-being seems to us to be without question. Playworkers could advance a new form of therapeutic endeavour that is not enshrined in the privilege of the adult practices but abides in the play of the child. Were we to seek an explanation of this new work and its purpose, a last word from Ken Wilber, might suffice, he noted:

> A person's growth, from infancy to adulthood, is simply a miniature version of cosmic evolution. Or, we might say, psychological growth or development in humans is simply a microcosmic reflection of universal growth on the whole, and has the same goal: the unfolding of ever higher-order unities and integrations. [35]

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