

This article was downloaded by: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam], [Bert van Oers]
On: 10 June 2013, At: 23:37
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered
office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/recr20>

Is it play? Towards a reconceptualisation of role play from an activity theory perspective

Bert van Oers^a

^a Department of Research and Theory in Education , VU University
Amsterdam , The Netherlands

Published online: 10 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Bert van Oers (2013): Is it play? Towards a reconceptualisation of role play from
an activity theory perspective, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 21:2, 185-198

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.789199>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any
substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing,
systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation
that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any
instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary
sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings,
demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or
indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Is it play? Towards a reconceptualisation of role play from an activity theory perspective

Bert van Oers*

Department of Research and Theory in Education, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT: This article proposes a reconceptualisation of role play on the basis of the Cultural-Historical theory (Vygotskij –Leont’ev – El’konin). The theory conceives of play as a specific mode of activity defined by a format that includes three basic parameters (rules, degrees of freedom and involvement). Reasoning from this Cultural-Historical Activity Theory about play offers answers to different problems that views on play have been struggling with for a long time, especially regarding the role of adults with respect to role play, the nature of playful learning, and the clarification of the development of playing in the course of ontogeny. A number of possible objections to this approach are discussed as well as possible advantages. Fundamentally, a Cultural-Historical approach to play implies the rejection of developmentalism and turns play into a cultural problem, based on the decisions educators have to make about what is culturally acceptable in (children’s) play activities.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article propose une reconceptualisation du jeu de rôle (role play) en prenant appui sur la théorie historico-culturelle (Vygotski-Leontiev-El’konin). Cette théorie conçoit le jeu comme un mode spécifique d’activité, défini par un format qui inclut trois paramètres de base (les règles, les degrés de liberté et l’implication). Raisonner à partir de cette approche du jeu amenée par la théorie de l’activité historico-culturelle permet d’envisager des réponses à des problèmes que les conceptions du jeu auxquelles nous nous confrontons depuis des lustres ne parviennent à résoudre : le rôle des adultes dans le jeu de rôle, la nature de l’apprentissage par le jeu et une meilleure connaissance du développement du jeu dans le cadre de l’ontogenèse. Sont discutés dans cet article tant un nombre d’objections à cette approche aussi bien que ses avantages potentiels. Fondamentalement, une approche historico-culturelle du jeu implique le rejet du développementalisme et considère le jeu comme une question culturelle, fondée sur les décisions que les éducateurs doivent prendre à propos de ce qui est culturellement acceptable dans les activités de jeu (des enfants).

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Dieser Artikel bietet eine Neukonzeption des Rollenspiels auf der Grundlage der Kulturhistorischen Theorie (Vygotskij-Leont’ev - El’konin). Die Theorie begreift Spiel als eine spezifische Art der Tätigkeit definiert durch ein Format, das drei grundlegende Parameter (Regeln, Freiheitsgrade und Engagement) enthält. Diese Kulturhistorische Tätigkeitstheorie über das Spiel gibt Antworten auf Probleme mit denen die Theoretiker über Spiel schon lange kämpfen: die Rolle der Erwachsenen in Bezug auf Rollenspiele, die Art spielerischen Lernens, und die Deutung der Entwicklung des Spieles im Laufe der Ontogenese. Eine Reihe von möglichen Widersprüchen zu diesem Ansatz werden diskutiert, wie auch dessen Vorteile. Grundsätzlich impliziert ein

*Email: bert.van.oers@vu.nl

kulturhistorischer Ansatz zum Spiel die Ablehnung des ‘Developmentalismus’ und eine Transformation des Spieles in ein kulturelles Problem, basiert auf den Entscheidungen von Erziehern über das was kulturell akzeptabel ist in (Kinder-) Spielaktivitäten.

RESUMEN: Este artículo propone la reconceptualización del juego de roles en la base de la teoría Histórico-Cultural (Vygotskij-Leont’ev – El’konin). La teoría concibe el juego como un modo específico de actividad definida por un formato que incluye tres parámetros básicos (normas, niveles de libertad e implicación). El razonamiento de esta teoría Histórico-Cultural sobre el juego ofrece respuestas a los problemas sobre los que las ideas en torno al juego han venido lidiando: el rol de los adultos con respecto al juego de roles, la naturaleza del aprendizaje a partir del juego y la clarificación del desarrollo del juego en el curso de la ontogenia. Un número de posibles objeciones a este enfoque son asimismo discutidas como ventajas posibles. Fundamentalmente, un enfoque histórico cultural del juego implica el rechazo de las teorías del desarrollo y convierte al juego en un problema cultural basado en las decisiones que los educadores han de realizar sobre lo que es culturalmente aceptable en las actividades del juego (infantiles).

Keywords: play; activity theory; rules; freedom; engagement

The need for conceptualisation of play

Despite the long history of studies on play, the debate on the nature and value of play has still not ended. The ambiguity of play and its developmental value was thoroughly discussed in 1997 by Sutton-Smith. In his view there were (by that time) a number of rhetorics regarding play and its value for children’s development, but most of their claims couldn’t be convincingly substantiated in empirical research. Although some of the claims regarding the value of play as a context for young children’s learning could be empirically supported in recent research (see Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2009), the notion of play by itself remains ambiguous and open for further refinement. Nevertheless, both for research and practice it is important to employ a clear (communicable) definition of play. In this article I want to propose a concept of play from the perspective of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, using role play as a main topic. On the basis of a theoretical analysis, it is claimed that this approach can provide consistent conceptualisations of a number of problems of play theory and research, for instance with regard to the role of the adult in role play, the understanding of playful learning and the development of learning during ontogeny. After addressing current attempts at finding a definition of play, and describing some of the problems of modern play theory, I will present an elaboration of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, from which play can be defined as a *mode of activity*, in which adults can justifiably participate (but are not obliged to), in order to promote meaningful playful learning of different types (conceptual, social, technical, metacognitive).

The elusive definition of play

Remarkably enough, in everyday practice it doesn’t appear too difficult to recognise some of children’s activities as play, but defining ‘play’ in general has seemed to be unsuccessful thus far. As Wittgenstein once pointed out, looking at how the word ‘play’ is used in different situations, it is impossible to find one feature that is common to them all (Wittgenstein 1953, par. 66). Therefore, due to the variety of uses of this term, and to the different properties activities characterised as play turn out to

have, it is impossible according to Wittgenstein, to find a general definition of play. Even 'pleasure', as the most mentioned characteristic of play in the literature and practice, disappears when we take piano playing as an example. Playing the piano, for example, is often hard work, not necessarily pleasurable when doing it. On the other hand (as Vygotsky 1978, 92 has pointed out) some pleasurable activities (like sucking a pacifier) may be highly pleasurable for a baby, but is not acknowledged as play.

Wittgenstein's approach is mainly logical-linguistic and may be true for the use of the word 'play' in ordinary language, but still does not preclude the possibility of constructing a definition from a psychological point of view, based on a thorough understanding of play as a form of human activity. Many everyday words (like straight line, circle, human being, friendship) do have an everyday meaning that is sufficient to recognise them in specific situations, but finding a formal definition for them has been more difficult and for most lay people not even necessary. The formal definitions of, for example, a straight line or a circle are not available for many people, but nevertheless they can recognise lines and circles whenever they encounter them in concrete situations. Lonergan once referred to such everyday definitions as 'nominal definitions' (Lonergan 1957, 10–11). They are based on knowledge of one or a few characteristics of the phenomenon at hand, and only require understanding of everyday language and how the selected characteristics should be applied in this vernacular language. So basically, a nominal definition is a name for an object, event or phenomenon, but not an explanation of it, based on understanding of the object (event, phenomenon) itself. Lonergan distinguishes nominal definitions from explanatory definitions, based on understanding of the interrelationships of all characteristics with some basic postulates regarding the object at hand. An explanatory definition opens the possibility of discovery of new qualities that may not be included in the definition, but can be added to it as a postulate on the basis of the understandings expressed in the explanatory definition (Lonergan 1957, 11–13).

Over the years there is a growing consensus on some of the basic characteristic of play. In his rich overview of play research, Smith (2010) listed a number of criteria for the recognition of play. In his view, play can be recognised as repetitive, fragmented, exaggerated, and re-ordering the usual sequence of actions (Smith 2010, 6). Furthermore, according to Smith (2010, 6–7), play is generally predicated as human behaviour that reveals flexibility, positive affect, non-literality, intrinsic motivation, and preference of performance over outcomes. Especially, the experience of pleasure and the absence of extrinsic goals are frequently mentioned as defining characteristics. On the basis of his critical review of play criteria, Burghardt (2011) comes up with the following list:

- Play is incompletely functional in the context in which it appears; functional actions in play do not by themselves contradict play, but in play these actions are typically combined with actions that do not contribute to the achievement of a goal;
- Play is spontaneous, pleasurable, rewarding or voluntary;
- Play differs from more serious behaviours in form (e.g. exaggerated), or timing (appears before it is actually needed for survival);
- Play is often repeated, but not in stereotypic forms;
- Play is initiated in the absence of acute or chronic stress.

(Burghardt 2011, 17).

Burghardt's contribution to a criterion-based definition of play is highly valuable for the operationalisation of play (especially in research settings), and can be considered as an important step forward in the discussions about play. However, it mainly contributes to a nominal definition for the practical recognition of play. It does not explain the relationships between these characteristics, nor specify a core notion of what play is and as such it is not yet an explanatory definition of play (in the sense of Lonergan, described above). A list of criteria is not yet a theory of play, which explains the dynamics of the players' activity, the internal relationships of its dimensions, and developmental changes (of the play activity and its players). It doesn't open new and empirically unexpected theoretical possibilities to be verified in further reasoning and empirical research.

Despite different approaches to defining play, a productive theory of play as a psychological phenomenon has turned out to be elusive until now. In the present article I want to propose a conceptualisation of play, based on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, and demonstrate how this theory can provide a productive explanatory definition of role play. I will first discuss some of the problems that current approaches to play find difficult to solve. A theory of play should at least be able to formulate answers to these problems.

Nagging problems of play theory

Due to the lack of an explanatory definition of play, recent play research and play-based pedagogical applications struggle with a number of problems that have turned out to be difficult to solve on the basis of available ideas. One of them is the *position of the adult* with regard to children's play. Proponents of free play are often highly reluctant with assigning a role to adults in children's play (see for example Montessori 1917; Paley 2004), and conceive of play as the child's own spontaneous and fantasy-led activity. Adults may guard children's play, enrich children's environment, and protect the child for dangers, but they should beware of intruding into child's play and spoiling it by their interventions. Opponents of this point of view (like for example Vygotskij; see also Karpov 2005) comment that 'free play' (if possible at all) is not an optimal way of educating children, since it does not provide children with the proper help for developmental progress. Moreover, cultural anthropological research (see for example Roopnarine 2011) has demonstrated that there is considerable cultural variation in the answers to the query about adults' participation in children's play. Hence, the occurrence of free play seems to be a matter of cultural choice, more than a developmental necessity in a certain period of child development. Until now, play theory does not provide a way to decide if adults may/should/can participate in children's play and if yes: when or under what kind of conditions? The debate on adult participation in play is primarily based on play rhetorics, advocating freedom, pleasure, fantasy, and purposelessness. The discussion often concentrates on the question whether children's activity can be called play, when it is constrained by rules or goal-directed actions. Such doubts arise, even though children have been acting with great pleasure and fantasy, but in a setting framed by adults or older peers. Is this really play? My own research (see van Oers 1994, 1996a, 1998) based on observational studies of play and learning in the context of children's adult guided play in a shoe shop, was often criticised for being too intrusive and not a study of play proper.

Another perplexing question for play researchers or practitioners following a play-based educational philosophy is *the explanation of learning* in the context of play.

Many people admit since long that young children do learn in their play (see for example Garvey 1990), but this learning is mostly seen as a spontaneous process, which remains unexplained in accounts of play. The problem is closely related to the role of the adult and the question whether she or he can ‘employ’ play for deliberately promoting specific learning processes. Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) have collected and reviewed different empirical studies in which such play-based guided learning has turned out to be successful in young children. They conclude that guided learning in young children’s play is possible, but at the same time they have to admit that it is still not clear what playful learning actually is (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2009, 54). Whenever learning occurs in the context of play (be it spontaneous or guided), a theoretical account of play must be able to explain learning as a process in the context of play as well. Until now, we can maintain that there is no valid explanatory definition of play that can account for playful learning.

A third unresolved problem concerns the problem of *play development* in the course of human ontogeny. Current views on play acknowledge that play does not stop after childhood, but most accounts of play development are confined to the development of the symbolic function (as a core development within play, see Piaget 1962), or describe play development as a transition towards rule-play (games and sport) and a playful attitude to reality (see: Dewey 1912/1979; Piaget 1962; Vygotsky 1978). It remains unclear, however, what this playful attitude is, how and when it manifests itself, how it emerges out of young children’s play. Young children obviously have a tendency to play too, so to what extent does this play attitude of older children differ from young children’s attitude to playing? Looking nowadays at play situations where older children, adolescents and adults are playing 3D virtual reality games (‘serious gaming’, see for example Gee 2007) in which they adopt a specified role, it is beyond doubt that this activity is quite similar to young children’s role play. But how to explain the differences and the development of this type of sophisticated play out of children’s role play?

In the following, I will develop an approach to role play, based on the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, and finally show how this approach addresses the problems just described. Moreover, it will be argued that the application of this theory can also provide criteria for answering the question ‘Is this play?’ in situations where participating adults and guided learning are involved. The article specifically focuses on role play, for the sake of brevity.

An activity theory approach to playing

Play as a cultural problem

The activity theory approach to human development as exposed in this article, is based on the work of Leont’ev and Vygotskij, and is generally characterised as a cultural-historical theory of human development and learning. This approach conceives of human development as a process that is based on interpersonal interactions with the help of cultural tools in the context of historically produced cultural practices. To avoid any misunderstandings about the culture-related assumptions of this approach, it is necessary to note that this point of view does not deny the influence of biological (including: neurological) conditions on the development of human beings (see for example Leont’ev 1981). In fact, one of Vygotskij’s colleagues, Lurija, is generally acknowledged as one of the founders of neuropsychology as a discipline. However, the article cannot address this problem here further.

In their elaborations of the Cultural-Historical theory, Vygotskij and Leont'ev also made a start with the interpretation of role play as a culturally determined phenomenon. Since Vygotskij's conception of play is not systematically elaborated and incomplete in different aspects, there can be criticism whether it represents a theory of play at all (see Lambert 2000). Nevertheless, Vygotskij and his colleagues point to a number of important concepts that underlie the activity theory approach of play. According to Vygotskij, freedom is an important characteristic of the child's play actions, but he emphasises immediately that this freedom cannot be absolute, as play (like any human activity) depends on rules too (see Vygotsky 1978). Characteristically, in children's role play, it is the *sense*¹ that children make of a particular cultural situation and its rules that motivates their actions. 'Sense' refers to personal significance and emotions which a child adheres to a situation or activities, and therefore role play in Vygotskij's view is essentially imbued with the child's personal imagination of a situation. Although Vygotskij did not explicitly make the conjunction between 'sense' and the child's freedom in play, it is justified to assume from the cultural-historical point of view that one of the most significant 'gifts' of play is that it allows the child the freedom to follow its personal sense and imagination.

In the view of Vygotskij and Leont'ev, however, this imagination does not precede the child's activity, but emerges in the context of an activity. According to Vygotskij, 'in play a child creates an imaginary situation' (Vygotsky 1978, 93). Although Vygotskij did not clearly define the notion of 'imaginary situation', we may assume (for example on the basis of Leont'ev's (1983, 318–319) analysis of play) that the 'imaginary situation' is basically an imagination of the action potentials of this situation: what can be done and how do people relate to each other within this activity? It is obvious that children can only create imaginations of activities they are somehow familiar with. Hence, role play in this cultural-historical point of view basically starts out from what is culturally given. In other words, culturally given activities (practices) are made playful in the child's role play. This is, by the way, consistent with the cultural-historical analysis of the relation between culture and play by the famous Dutch cultural-historian Huizinga (1938/1951): it is not play that is the origin of culture, but cultural practices, playfully accomplished, should be seen as the origins of cultural developments (see van Oers 2013 and in press for further argument). Although it is the child's personal imagination of the activity that motivates the content and actual course of a role play activity, in origin the activity is a cultural entity. This makes role play essentially a cultural phenomenon, dependent on cultural decisions that allow (some level of) playfulness in an activity, or not.

The cultural-historical view on play as a *mode of activity* (i.e. as a way an activity is carried out) is unambiguous about the role of adults' participation in play. According to Leont'ev, every activity is a product of cultural history and by definition this always implies (virtually or actually) the participation of others. Consequently, this legitimises the participation of others in playful activities, and in particular of more knowledgeable others, like adults. This does not mean that adults always *must* take part in children's play. There is no theoretically inherent reason to reject the possibility and usefulness of children's solitary play or play with peers, but we should not forget that a child who is putting doll into bed, covering it with a blanket and singing a song for the child, is involved in solitary role play, but still is re-enacting in her own way adult behaviour that she has in mind (in her imaginary situation for this role play, in terms of Vygotskij). On the other hand, more manifest participation in children's role play is not forbidden by the activity theory approach and may even be to the benefit of young children, but – as I shall argue later in this article – this is subject to special conditions.

The cultural-historical conception of play as a mode of activity also has far-reaching consequences of which Vygotskij, Leont'ev and their followers (like El'konin) may not have been fully aware. By conceiving of play as a *mode* of activity, play becomes a cultural problem rather than a developmental one. In the view on play that has dominated thinking on human development for more than a century, play is seen as a characteristic of a certain stage of human or animal development and is predicated on a developmentalism assumption. A Cultural-Historical theory of play basically rejects the assumption that play as a psychological phenomenon is determined by developmental dynamics or maturation (the developmentalism assumption), but sees play as an outcome of cultural processes, human decisions and cultural values and understandings (see also Fler 2011; Fler and Peers 2012). Indeed, El'konin (1972) is explicit on his view on play as a cultural product, when he contends that the emergence of role play depends on the child's position in society in the western industrialised society. However, he discusses play merely as a characteristic period in children's ontogeny. Play after the age of eight is not discussed or explained in El'konin's theory of periodisation of human development (El'konin 1972). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) asserts that the position of play in children's life changes in the transition to school age (after the age of 8 or 9), but he does not clearly explain the notion of play beyond the preschool period, nor explain the transition from play to school learning. It looks like Vygotskij and his colleagues haven't yet fully acknowledged all consequences of a Cultural-Historical theory of play, and have not yet fully conquered developmentalism. In the following I will propose an activity theory of play that is consistent with the cultural-historical approach of Vygotskij, but goes beyond developmentalism by conceiving of play as a basically cultural problem, i.e. as a phenomenon that is dependent on cultural decisions and values with respect to particular parameters (see van Oers 2013, in press).

Play as a format of cultural activity

A Cultural-Historical theory of play starts out from the idea that children start playing in the context of their participation in cultural activities. Play in this view is a mode of activity that can be characterised by specifying the format that describes how an activity in general is accomplished. As I argued in a number of publications (see van Oers 2009, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), the format of activity is a general characterisation of human activity based on three parameters: involvement, rules, and degrees of freedom. It is assumed that every human activity can be characterised by specifying the *level of involvement* of the actors, the type of *rules* that they are following and the *degrees of freedom* that are allowed to them in making their own choices as to the actions to be performed, the goals to achieve, the tools, the rules, etc. From this activity point of view, play can be defined as an activity that is accomplished by highly involved actors, who follow some rules (either implicitly or explicitly), and who have some freedom with regard to the interpretation of the rules, and to the choice of other constituents of an activity (like tools, goals, etc.).

As El'konin has already pointed out (1978, 246), role play always includes rules that are related to the roles of the players. The rules are related to how they interact, how they use their tools, or how to organise the play. On the basis of our play observations over the past decades, it is possible to distinguish the following rules in children's play (see also van Oers in press):

- *Social rules*, indicating how to interact with each other (sharing toys or not? How to solve conflicts?).

- *Technical rules*: how to use a certain toy, like scissors, or a mobile phone, or a till in the supermarket play?
- *Conceptual rules*, e.g. how to count rules, or other rules with a conceptual basis like ‘animals’).
- *Strategic rules*: rules that support the course of an activity (e.g. division of roles, or making a plan, intermediate reflection (meta-play in the sense of Bateson).

When children develop in their play, the number of observed rules may increase, the rules become more and more complex, and the number of conceptual rules and strategic rules become more important for the role play. However, the degrees of freedom that are essential to the play format, allow the children to observe a rule or not, to interpret the rule (or even change it) according to their own understanding and interests. Although it is supposed that role play always implies some rules, the rules can be highly implicit in young children’s play and only be manifest as regularities in their play behaviours. Obviously, there is always a tension between the degrees of freedom and the rules in the play. It is often an important source of conflicts among children in the course of their role play.

Reasoning about play from this activity point of view, leads to a number of interesting observations. First of all we see that the provisions in the activity that enhance the participants’ involvement and degrees of freedom, are important conditions for the experience of pleasure and for the emergence of fantasy in the course of role play. As such, the organisation of activities as play yields the classic characteristics of play (pleasure, freedom and fantasy). Pleasure, freedom and fantasy are consequences of the play format, rather than the defining characteristics (as in nominal definitions).

Moreover, the occurrence of play is now dependent on decisions of adults or cultural constraints regarding the rules that have to be followed and the degrees of freedom that are permitted. Hence, as a cultural phenomenon, play is first of all a cultural problem as it requires decisions about how the parameters of the format may be materialised. None of these decisions is self-evident, but depends on cultural values (like child image, morality, norms of safety or decency). Adults are very different in decisions regarding children’s play when genitals become involved and in some cases even ‘kissing’ in play is prohibited and discontinued by stopping the whole play. Several other examples may show that the decisions on the rules and the degrees of freedom are adults’ responsibility as is the evaluation of play in those situations. Putting a child on a high chair near the dinner table drastically reduces the children degrees of free movement and as such limits the child’s opportunities to play. Likewise, the decision to give the children toy needles (rather than a real one) while playing hospital, is based on cultural decisions. In one of our classroom observations in which children were playing ‘builders on a construction site’, the teacher decided in the course of the play to offer the children (five-year-olds) real stone bricks. In addition to the provision of these bricks, the teacher also agreed with the children on some technical rules (regarding how to pile the bricks safely) and social rules (‘be careful with each other’). The teacher was guarding the activity to guarantee each child’s safety, but the children were freely using the bricks with pleasure and fantasy while building a house in their classroom that they could enter like a real house. No accident was reported and the activity had all characteristics of play (both in the classical sense and in the sense as defined above in terms of the play format). When the teacher, however, would have provided strict rules and instructions with regard to

the piling of the bricks following a strict construction plan, she would have reduced the children's degrees of freedom and probably impaired their involvement. In that case she would have destroyed the quality of the activity as play. This teacher solved the problems in favour of the children's role play.

A third observation that is to be discussed here briefly is the enormous broadening of the activities to be called play. As I said before, each activity can in principle be formatted as play when children are engaged voluntarily, follow some rules of the activity and are permitted to enjoy some freedom in the way they may carry out the activity. The brick example was commented several times with the question 'Is this play?' Some found the activity more a kind of work. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the children playing the role of construction workers were demonstrating all classic characteristics of play and did 'work' in highly involved ways, using their freedom and fantasy, and following specific rules to their own accord. Hence according to the nominal and theoretical definition of play, we can maintain yes, this is play! This is also how the children felt it. In one of my previous studies the issue of children's personal experiences of an activity was explicitly addressed, especially with regard to the introduction of schematising as an element in children's play (see van Oers 1994). The children involved evaluated this externally introduced tool as an enrichment of their play, were eager to continue and showed no decrease of their involvement. However, more research is needed to figure out more precisely which types of activity are indeed experienced as play by children, and for what reasons.

In another case study that I have described several times (see for example van Oers 1998), viewers can see four children (five- and six-year-olds) sitting at a table with the teacher. They had a piece of paper with numbers that represented the stock of shoes in their shoe shop. Buying or selling new shoes was represented in the activity by respectively red and green cards in two separate piles. Each card had a number on it, and drawing a card with a particular colour from a pile designated either selling or buying shoes, that is to say: adding or subtracting the number on the card to or from the number on their sheet (their stock). When this video clip was demonstrated to an audience without comment, all viewers reported a regular arithmetic lesson, with children doing arithmetical work. No one called it play; sometimes it was called a game. However, explaining the background and demonstrating how this activity emerged out of a play in a shoe shop, helped to show the play character of the children's activity. Some children in the classroom voluntarily chose to play the role of the stock keeper in their play (when others were costumers or tending the cashier desk). They were following some conceptual rules, but still had some freedom as to draw either a red or a green card, and played their role in engaged ways as a part meaningfully embedded in the shoe-shop play. On the basis of the criteria of the play format it is justified to call it play.

This stretching of the concept of play, often also leads to the objection that all activity then may be called play. A closer look at human cultural activities, however, easily refutes this criticism. Both in young children's lives and adults' there are lots of activities that people have to perform perfunctorily, based on strictly rule-governed operation patterns in which freedom is not possible, nor is real involvement expected or achieved. Examples range from potty training, learning table manners, to algorithmic procedures and direct instruction-based learning (even in young children). In these cases the mode of activity does not follow the previously indicated play format. In these cases children's activities are not play as they don't have the required degrees of freedom. The choice of such activities is based on cultural (pedagogical) decisions that restrict children's freedom and authentic involvement (for reasons good or bad).

The activity theory approach outlined above claims the preservation of the ‘classic’ criteria of the nominal definition, but as a theory it also claims to be able to solve at least the three problems presented earlier. I will briefly discuss general answers to these problems in the next section.

The potentials of an activity theory approach to playing.

The role of the adult in children’s play

As explained above, the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory approach sees cultural activities as intergenerational and positions adults as (virtual or actual) members of any cultural activity. It is assumed that adults are always present, but in solitary play they are virtually present in the objects (toys for example) or tools the children are provided with (or withheld from). In an activity theory approach, the question is not whether an adult is permitted to participate in children’s play, but when and why she or he should participate in certain situations. The theory does not prescribe that adults ought to participate, but should be able to describe the requirements and consequences of adult participation in child’s play. Adult participation, yes or no, is a cultural decision dependent on the pedagogical aims we want to achieve (see also Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008). But when adults participate in children’s play, this is subject to specific conditions. Adults participating in children’s play should keep in mind not to impair or even discontinue children’s play. They should never minimise children’s freedom, impair their involvement, or impose rules that go beyond the activity needs of the children. Pedagogical adult engagement in children’s play should primarily enhance the play format of children’s activity and answer the children’s need for help to improve their participation in the current role play.

What is playful learning?

Within activity theory, learning is conceived as a function of all activities, and is defined as sustaining qualitative changes of actions or activities. Cultural activities evolve (both in history and in ontogeny) by learning. Through learning (i.e. changing and improving actions), participants enhance their abilities to participate in cultural activities. Actions can change on a number of parameters (see Galperin 1969; see also van Oers 1996b), for example on the level they are carried out: initially material actions (like building a wall with available blocks) can evolve into new forms, expressed in narrative descriptions of how to build a wall or schematic drawings of the anticipated end results. When we observe children in play we can frequently witness their actions changing and often observe that the changed actions re-appear in later situations. The changes can be the result of trial-and-error, mere practicing of specific actions (by repetition), peer cooperation or adult guidance (e.g. by demonstration how an action can be performed). Close observation of children playing with construction material shows how their actions of piling up the blocks changes when they have the need to build a stable construction. In a role play children often learn language by acquiring new words that they can use for better participation in their role play. As we have demonstrated in our research, playfully formatted activity can be a fruitful context for vocabulary learning, without impairing the quality of play when the new words adults provide answer the children’s needs (see van Oers 2010; van Oers and Duikers 2012).

Development of role play

Through the conception of play as a mode of activity, defined by a specific format, and on the assumption that every cultural activity can in principle be accomplished in playful ways, it is possible to conceive of play development as a process of increasing ability in the playful accomplishments of the cultural activities children have to appropriate in the course of their life (van Oers 2013). When we focus, for instance, on pupils' conscious learning activity (after the ages of seven or eight), this theory claims that this learning can be carried out as play. In fact, learning activity is one of the new developments in play activity that is predominantly characterised by the use of conceptual and strategic rules. But when pupils can engage in such learning activities by starting out from their own questions and interests, the odds are that children will be highly involved (provided they can get appropriate help when needed). Moreover, when such activity is open for children's own experimenting, imaginations and suggestions for solutions (like in problem-based learning), there is ample (but conditional) freedom for the participants to organise their activity according to their own understandings. According to the activity-interpretation, there is no objection to call this activity role play, as children are emulating some version of the cultural production of (academic) knowledge, and as such are playing the role of scientists. Sure, the biggest threat here is, that teachers finally impose specific 'scientific' answers on pupils, that do not really answer pupils' needs, annihilate their freedom to co-develop the new meanings, and as such destroy the play character of this learning activity. Common classroom practice in subject matter learning is indeed not much of a playful endeavour. It is interesting to note here that Huizinga was also aware that the imposition of strict rules and presuppositions regarding desirable outcomes could destroy the play character of science (see Huizinga 1938/1951, 262–263).

However, the restricted view of learning in common practice does not falsify the possibility that conscious learning activity can be playful. In the Dutch play-based curriculum, 'Developmental Education', upper-grade primary school pupils are often in such inquiry-based research (see for example van Oers and Dobber in press). Indeed, such implementations of the cultural-historical play theory for children's learning activities after the age of eight-years-old, often led to scepticism and doubtful questioning: 'Is this play?' Applying the criteria for the play mode of activities, it is consistent to maintain that conscious learning activity can be playful. Children are playing the role of scientists, not essentially different from their realisations of the role of 'mother' when playing house. Similar analyses can be applied to situations of sports and gaming.

The activity theory approach to play answers the question of play development by referring to people's developments in the use of more and more complex rules and their increasing ability to deal with these rules in more or less free (creative) ways. Decisions if and how pupils are allowed to play freely when learning, cannot be justified by developmental theory alone, but is basically a cultural problem, especially regarding the freedom educators tend to allow pupils and their efforts to get pupils really engaged in pursuing their intellectual imaginations.

Conclusions and discussion

Reasoning from the point of view of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, it is possible to construe a theory of play as a specific mode of activity. As has been argued, this theory provides the conceptual tools to better understand the role of adults with

respect to children's play, to explain learning and the development of playing in the course of human ontogeny.

Application of the theory also opens new ways to conceive of old problems. I will discuss just two of them. The classic (loosely defined and often criticised) distinction between play and work in young children can now be formulated in a more specific way. When children's goal-directed activities that early childhood educators tend to call 'work', actually are carried out with high involvement, respecting the rule-governed nature of the activity and the freedom of children with regard to the organisation of this activity, there is no need to distinguish between play and work. In such cases, play is children's work indeed. However, when the work actually implies strict execution of tasks, following specific rules without the freedom to decide how to interpret the rules or to invent new ways of doing them, 'work' is different from play. Even when children like doing them (which actually happens) such work is still different from play as it minimises children's degrees of freedom.

With regard to the use of the notion of freedom, it is also possible to make a further distinction between the classic interpretation and the one that is implemented in the activity theory approach to play. Traditionally, free play means that the child may play *without* intervention of adults and too much cultural constraints on their meanings. The notion of freedom that is applied here is the negative one: being free *from* external restrictions or interference. As we have seen above, from a cultural-historical and educational point of view, we can be very sceptical whether people can ever be free from external constraints. The rule-governed nature of all cultural activities in fact denies this freedom. The relative freedom within playfully accomplished cultural activities basically refers to a positive conception of freedom: freedom *to* make sense, to imagine and carry out new ways of acting within cultural context.

In this article, the Cultural-Historical theory of play is mainly instantiated with examples of role play. Further analysis of play in under-threes is needed. For now there is reason to assume that this early-interactive play (like peek-a-boo) and manipulative play can be analysed with the same parameters (involvement, rules, and degrees of freedom). At the moment it must be taken into account that some instances of young child behaviour that are generally called 'play' might not pass the critical analysis from an activity theory point of view. And again, the question arises: 'Is this play?'. The answer may be 'no' in some cases, on theoretical grounds. But here too, finding the answer requires solving a cultural problem with regard to our cultural representation of play in young children.

As a final note, the epistemological function of a theory of play must be articulated. The presented reconceptualisation of play is a theoretical tool for research and practice. Although this may suggest a strongly adult-centred definition of concretely enacted play activities, this cannot be inferred from this theory. Nevertheless, it is definitely important to study both adults' and children's perspectives on activities that are theoretically construed as play. In particular, further studies are needed on how decisions and evaluations of rules, allowed degrees of freedom, and involvement are negotiated, both by adults and children.

Note

1. In the Russian text of Vygotskij's play article the word sense ('smysl') is used (not 'značenie', which refers to cultural meanings). Unfortunately in the English translation of this article on play (see Vygotsky, 1978) the word 'meaning' is used, rather than sense (smysl'),

which might be confusing and miss out the basically emotional dimensions of the child's organization of play activities.

References

- Burghardt, G. M. 2011. "Defining and Recognizing Play." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play*, edited by A. D. Pellegrini, 9–18. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, J. 1912/1979. "Play." In *Middle Works, Vol. 7 (1912–1914)*, edited by J. Dewey, 318–324. Carbondale [etc.]: Southern Illinois University Press.
- El'konin, D. B. 1972. "Toward the Problem of Stages in the Mental Development of the Child." *Soviet Psychology* 10: 225–251.
- El'konin, D. B. 1978. *Psichologija igry* [The Psychology of Play]. Moscow: Pedagogika.
- Fleer, M. 2011. "Kindergartens in Cognitive Times: Imagination as a Dialectical Relation between Play and Learning." *International Journal of Early Childhood* 43: 245–259.
- Fleer, M., and C. Peers. 2012. "Beyond Cognitivism: Creating Collectively Constructed Imaginary Situations for Supporting Learning and Development." *Australian Educational Researcher* 39 (4): 413–430.
- Galperin, P. Ja. 1969. "Stages in the Development of Mental Acts." In *A Handbook of Contemporary Soviet Psychology*, edited by M. Cole and I. Maltzman, 249–273. New York: Basic Books.
- Garvey, C. 1990. *Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gee, J. P. 2007. *Good Video Games + Good Learning*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Hirsh-Pasek, K., R. Michnick-Golinkoff, L. E. Berk, and D. G. Singer. 2009. *A Mandate for Playful Learning. Presenting the Evidence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Huizinga, J. 1938/1951. *Homo Ludens. Proeve ener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur* [Homo Ludens. Attempt at Explaining the Play Element of Culture]. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink.
- Karpov, Y. 2005. *The Neo-Vygotskian Approach to Child Development*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lambert, E. B. 2000. "Questioning Vygotsky's 'Theory' of Play." *Early Child Development and Care* 160 (1): 25–31.
- Leont'ev, A. N. 1981. *Problemy razvitija psichiki* [Problems of psychological development]. Partial English translation in: Problems of the development of the mind. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/leontev/index.htm>
- Leont'ev, A. N. 1983. "Psichologičeskie osnovy doškol'noj igry." [Psychological Foundations of Preschool Play]. *Izbrannye psichologičeskie proizvedenija* [Collected Psychological Works], edited by A. N. Leont'ev, Vol. I, 303–323. Moscow: Pedagogika.
- Loneragan, B. J. F. 1957. *Insight. A Study of Human Understanding*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Montessori, M. 1917. *The advanced Montessori-Method. Vol. 1: Spontaneous Activity in Education* (Translated by Florence Simmonds). New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917. Book is in public domain. See Google Books: New York Public Library copy.
- Paley, V. S. 2004. *A Child's Work. The Importance of Fantasy Play*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Piaget, J. 1962. *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*. New York: Norton.
- Pramling Samuelsson, I., and M. A. Carlsson. 2008. "The Playing Learning Child: Towards a Pedagogy of Early Childhood." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 52 (6): 623–641.
- Roopnarine, J. L. 2011. "Cultural Variations in Beliefs About Play, Parent–Child Play, and Children's Play: Meaning for Childhood Development." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play*, edited by A. D. Pellegrini, 19–37. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, P. 2010. *Children and Play*. Oxford, UK: Wiley/Blackwell.
- Sutton-Smith, B. 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- van Oers, B. 1994. "Semiotic Activity of Young Children in Play: The Construction and Use of Schematic representations." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 2 (1): 19–34.

- van Oers, B. 1996a. "Are you Sure? The Promotion of Mathematical Thinking in the Play Activities of Young Children." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 4 (1): 71–87.
- van Oers, B. 1996b. "The Dynamics of School Learning." *The Structure of Learning Processes*, edited by J. Valsiner and H-G. Voss, 205–229. New York: Ablex.
- van Oers, B. 1998. "The Fallacy of Decontextualisation." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 5 (2): 135–142.
- van Oers, B. 2009. "Developmental Education: Improving Participation in Cultural Practices." In *Childhood Studies and the Impact of Globalization: Policies and Practices at Global and Local Levels- World Yearbook of Education 2009*, edited by M. Fleer, M. Hedegaard and J. Tudge, 293–317. New York: Routledge.
- van Oers, B. 2010. "Children's Enculturation Through Play." In *Engaging Play*, edited by L. Brooker and S. Edwards, 195–209. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.
- van Oers, B. 2012a. "Culture in Play." In *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, edited by J. Valsiner, 936–956. New York: Oxford University Press.
- van Oers, B. 2012b. "Meaningful Cultural Learning by Imitative Participation: The Case of Abstract Thinking in Primary School." *Human Development* 55 (3): 136–158. DOI: 10.1159/000339293
- van Oers, B. 2013. "An Activity Theory View on the Development of Playing." In *Children's Play and Development. Cultural-Historical Perspectives*, edited by I. Schousboe and D. Winther-Lindqvist. Dordrecht: Springer.
- van Oers, B. in press. "Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Play." In *SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*, edited by L. Brooker, S. Edwards and M. Blaise. London: Sage.
- van Oers, B., and M. Dobber. in press. Communication and regulation in a problem-oriented primary school curriculum. To appear in *British journal of educational psychology monographs*.
- van Oers, B., and D. Duijkers. 2012. "Teaching in a Play-Based Curriculum: Theory, Practice and Evidence of Developmental Education for Young Children." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 55 (1): 1–24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2011.637182>
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. English translation: L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (G. Anscombe translation). Oxford: Blackwell, 1953.