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### Play: A Historical and Cultural Approach

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**Abstract.** The article examines the historical dynamics of the theoretical and methodological approaches to the essence of play and their significance in modern scholarship and culture. The role of play in the philosophy of ancient times is highlighted. Classical playing theories are presented: Friedrich Schiller's and Herbert Spencer's theories of surplus forces, Richard Lazarus' theory of recuperation, Karl Groos' theory of exercise and G. Stanley Hall's theory of recapitulation. Play (as a way to achieve pleasure) is examined through Karl Bühler's theory. We pay attention to Freud's psychodynamic theory in the context of understanding play, as well as the views of Erickson and Winnicott. Bateson's metacommunicative theory is singled out separately. The theory of cognitive development by Piaget and Vygotsky pays special attention to the consideration of approaches to the understanding of play. The role of play in the context of pedagogical, cultural, and anthropological research is presented. Due to the analysis of the presented theories, we made the conclusion about the role of play in present-day culture. The study aims to find out the meaning of play in the representation of modern youth. To solve the tasks set, we used the sociological research method. As a result, we surveyed the young people of the city. This survey allowed us to understand the place of play in modern young people's lives and reveal its attitude to gaming activities. With the help of a survey, we identified such essential functions of play as relaxation and entertainment. The least important of these was the psycho-technical function. Computer and desktop games were recognized as the most popular types of play among modern young people. The least interest among respondents is caused by such a type of play as gambling. This work is only an initial stage in the study. We plan to continue the study on a representative sample.

**Keywords:** play, playing activity culture, modern young people

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## Международный отдел

Научная статья

### Игра: историко-культурологический подход

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается историческая динамика теоретико-методологических подходов к сущности игры и их значение в современной науке и культуре. Выделена роль игры в философии древних времён. Представлены классические теории игры: теория избытка сил Шиллера и Спенсера, теория восстановления сил Лазаруса, теория упражнения Грооса, теория рекапитуляции Холла. Игра как способ достижения удовольствия рассмотрена через теорию Бюлера. Уделено внимание психодинамической теории Фрейда в контексте понимания игры, взглядам Эриксона и Винникота. Отдельно выделена метакоммуникативная теория Бейтсона. Особое внимание направлено на рассмотрение подходов к пониманию игры в теории когнитивного развития Пиаже и Выготского. Представлена роль игры в контексте педагогических, культурологических и антропологических исследований. Благодаря анализу представленных теорий делается вывод о том, какую роль в современной культуре занимает игра. Одна из задач исследования – выяснение значения игры в представлении современной молодёжи. Для их решения в работе использован социологический метод исследования. Анкетный опрос позволил понять место игры в жизни представителей современного молодого поколения г. Владивостока и выявить их отношение к игровой деятельности. Удалось выделить такие важные функции игры, как релаксационная и развлекательная. Наименее важной оказалась психотехническая функция. Самыми востребованными видами игр у современной молодёжи признаны компьютерные и настольные. Менее всего заинтересованности у респондентов вызывает такой вид игр, как азартные. Данная работа является лишь начальным этапом в исследовании. Автор планирует продолжить изучение на репрезентативной выборке.

**Ключевые слова:** игра, игровая деятельность, культура, современная молодёжь

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**P**lay as a socio-cultural phenomenon has its own unique history. In the course of the historical development of society, it has become increasingly important for the formation of personality. Early childhood researchers worldwide assign a significant role to play, noting its

importance and significance in a child's life. Children playing together engage and develop their emotional, cognitive, physical, and social skills. By playing, the child becomes involved in interaction with the surrounding world at an early age. Playing allows children to create and explore a world

that they can master, overcoming their fears, practicing adult roles, and this can happen when a child is alone or in combination with other children or adults. While playing, a growing person can evaluate his or her feelings and emotions in a new way.

The topic of children's games and the work of supporting them is acutely relevant in many countries of the world. The right to play is fixed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 of the Convention states that "every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. The member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."<sup>1</sup> In the comments to the article, the signs of playing are also recorded:

- playing is a free activity, devoid of coercion and control from adults;
- playing should bring an emotional uplift. The source of pleasure is the process of activity and not its result or evaluation;
- playing always demonstrates spontaneity, unpredictability, and active testing of oneself, and the subject of playing.<sup>2</sup>

However, children are hardly the only ones who are in need of playing. Play in present-day culture allows people of any age to use their creative abilities, develop their imagination, dexterity, and physical strength, help improve their skills and acquire new ones, leading, in particular, to increased confidence and stability in the future. Play helps master the skill of working in a team and learn how to negotiate and resolve conflicts.

Due to the development of digital technologies, playing has become widespread, and the playing space has expanded its boundaries. Play as a form of culture has become an essential part of today's developing society, allowing groups to unite and share experiences through cooperation or competition. At the same time, through a carefully thought-out scenario, it focuses on current world problems and impacts the economy and the social sphere. Play has long extended in its boundaries beyond entertainment, occupying a separate economic niche with its own rules, specialists, researchers, and, most importantly, participants. More and more young people are trying to get into the playing industry since at the present time it has become a promising multi-faceted industry related to both training and entertainment. Currently, it has become a professional activity in the field of advertising, PR, psychological and animation technologies, business communications, etc.

The idea of the role and place of play in culture has been one of the critical problems of philosophical analysis since ancient times. This fact was mentioned in the works of ancient thinkers and scholars who presented play as an activity that does not bring any specific benefit and bears no relation to the truth but is accompanied by a sense of pleasure from a break in everyday life.<sup>3</sup> In the process of playing, a child can cultivate the necessary skills and learn about the world.<sup>4</sup>

People still engage in a great amount of debate about what playing is. The features of play and certain aspects of its phenomenon are studied by psychologists, cultural scholars, sociologists, philosophers, etc. There are many theoretical explanations by authors in Russia and in other countries about what play is and why it exists. [1]



The most general view of the history of playing activity allows us to distinguish two main opposite points of view on the problem of the origin of play:

- Play is considered an instinctive-biological activity of a person, a historical precursor of labor and culture;

- Play is a social phenomenon by its nature, which arose from practical activities of people.

Friedrich Schiller's German philosophy considered play to be an aesthetic phenomenon with a specific goal, a sensual ideal (beauty), and a certain state, which is a free manifestation of all human creative abilities, the development of their sensory and spiritual forces. In play people can change not only themselves but also the world around them.<sup>5</sup> According to the views of English sociologist and the creator of synthetic philosophy Herbert Spencer, play was considered to be a product of surplus energy remaining even after basic needs of people are satisfied.<sup>6</sup> In science, this position is known as the theory of surplus forces.

The opposite view suggests that play makes up for the lack of energy spent on work.<sup>7</sup> In this case, play is an activity through which working individuals restore their exhausted energy.

Classical theories such as Karl Groos' theory of exercises and G. Stanley Hall's theory of recapitulation examine play from the point of view of instincts. According to Hall, it helps eliminate a number of primitive and unnecessary instinctive skills, rather than contribute to a person's survival in the future. The author believes that playing helps children pass briefly through the stages of development of all humankind.<sup>8</sup> Play in Groos's theory acts as training of adult activity, strengthening the instincts necessary for the future. For adults, play recedes into the background before serious life problems.

For a child, it is the main content of life. Analyzing the difference between play and serious activities, Groos notes the feeling of freedom inherent in play and that it provides a source of pleasure. If it is not the occupation itself that is pleasant in work, but the goal, the result of work, then in play, on the contrary, the occupation itself, which is performed without any external goal, is pleasant.<sup>9</sup>

Another German scholar, Karl Ludwig Bühler, accepting Groos' theory, believed that the main mechanism for play is the desire for pleasure. Bühler defined play as an activity accompanied by the functional satisfaction of deep instincts inherent in any person, which cannot find satisfaction in the real conditions of a child's life. According to Bühler, the primary source of play is contained not in individual instincts but in general innate drives.<sup>10</sup> He borrows the content of these drives entirely from Freud: the desire for liberation, for merging with the environment, and the tendency to repeat.

Theories developed over the past century include psychoanalysis. Play is essential for the child's emotional development.<sup>11</sup> and acts as a catharsis in eliminating negative feelings associated with traumatic events.<sup>12</sup> In addition, play helps in diagnosis, and in some cases, in the healing process.<sup>13</sup>

According to the metacommunicative theory, it is emphasized that in play children learn to act simultaneously on two levels:

- imaginary meanings of objects and actions;

- their own personalities, the real personalities of other players, and the real values of objects and actions used in play.<sup>14</sup>

Johan Huizinga's anthropological theory considers play to represent the primary function of man, one of the essential spiritual elements of life, noting its universality for humanity and justifying its greater antiquity than culture. In his opinion, it is not play that

is born within culture, but human culture is born from play. Huizinga considered such cultural forms as speech, myth, and even science as possessing grounds in play. Play is an essential factor in the formation of culture, it is an element present in every culture, and it is so vital that it makes every culture look like play. Furthermore, if initially, the scholar focuses on such a feature of play as frivolity, he later defined it as a free action carried out in the space of the playing community and having a strict internal order. The in-depth research carried out by Huizinga is essential for understanding the essence of play in different cultures, substantiating the role of various forms of play and such elements as tension and uncertainty as a criterion of the playing process and the formation of ethical principles and virtue in a person as the consequences of play.<sup>15</sup>

The German philosopher Fink spoke about play as an activity that is closely related to other activities. In his opinion, play does not need to be brought from the outside since playing situations and playing actions are closely interwoven into everyday life. To some extent, everyone has participated in play, so that every person can speak about it based on his or her own experience. Even if it seems that a person has long left behind the playing stage of his or her life, he or she would still be involved in the game in the private, family, and public spheres.<sup>16</sup>

There are also theories concerning play in the context of cognitive development, vibrant examples of which are presented in the views on play of Piaget and Vygotsky.

For Piaget, play is the “first world” activity on the part of the child, the world of imagination. In play children force reality to match their perspective without adapting their way of thinking to reality. Piaget believed that play involves the demonstration of already learned actions

and promotes learning, opening up a new experience to the child.<sup>17</sup>

Vygotsky, on the one hand, supported the views of ancient scholars who justified the implementation of the function of obtaining pleasure in play, but, on the other hand, noted the importance of collective requirements for the implementation of the rules of play, thereby he justified the importance of the socializing element in play. He noted that the sphere of play is not a prototype of everyday activity, because, in real life, the action prevails over the meaning. In play the action is subordinate to semantic meaning. Only in play can a child be strictly subject to the rules because it is in playing that obeying the rules leads to pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

The question of what role play carries in the socialization and development of the child has also provided considerable interest in the sphere of pedagogical sciences. In the organization of education and training, play, according to teachers, can give pleasure, self-affirmation in interesting classes and, most importantly, in simple form for preparing for active work.<sup>19</sup>

While studying the phenomenon of play, D. B. Elkonin believed that it must be studied as a form of life and special activity of children, as a means of orientation in the world of human actions, human relations, goals, and motives. According to the Soviet psychologist, a person’s need for play arises from the first year of his or her life and later embodies his or her attitude towards the outside world and social reality.<sup>20</sup>

Play is a special type of activity that replaces the real situation with a conditional one. However, even in this conditional situation, play may pursue quite serious goals to form certain skills, feelings, and emotions.<sup>21</sup> It also serves as a means of transmitting cultural values. The origin of play in ancient society is connected with



the origin of art. The desire to experience feelings from a particular activity led a person to ritual games, dances, songs.<sup>22</sup> The main core of the ceremony is the ritual part, mandatory for all participants, where the most significant and important movements, gestures, and actions are honed. Play (as a way of realizing the plastic capabilities of the human body) has three main features:

- the illusory;
- variability;
- freedom.

Because of the imitation of actions related to hunting or other everyday activities, play has become a phenomenal space, a “testing ground” for the formation of human consciousness and mental apparatus aimed at controlling behavioral reactions.<sup>23</sup>

The main problem for modern researchers is the lack of a general definition of the term “play.” The author analyzed the presented theories. Thus, it becomes clear that there is no shortage of ideas regarding the concept of “play” under consideration. However, although the author carefully explains playing behavior, each scholar limits his or her research to a specific aspect. We should note that over time, the role and place of play in a person’s life have changed dramatically. If the ancient thinkers considered play to be frivolous and unproductive, then further research by scholars included both the instinctive-biological aspect and the social-psychological. Play occupies a special place in cultural theories that link the emergence of culture with playing activities.

In an attempt to find out what play is for modern young people, we have conducted a study, the results of which are presented later in the article.

To identify playing preferences and the attitude of young people to playing activities, we have used the sociological method (in the form of a survey). The data

was collected based on Google Forms using a questionnaire developed by the author.

The study involved 90 people aged 14 to 30 years in the city of Vladivostok. The purpose of the study was to find out the meaning of play in the representation of young people. The objectives of the study included: the analysis of theoretical approaches to understanding the term “play,” as well as the study of the role and place of play in the life of modern young.

The study used a cultural-anthropological approach and a sociological method (in the form of a survey), carried out both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data obtained.

Among the respondents, of which 40% were women and 60% were men, the results showed that 77% prefer computer games, 58% prefer mobile games, 48% prefer board games, and 31% prefer role-playing. In contrast, such types of games as the mobile varieties (urban orientation, etc.) and sports (football, basketball, etc.) have not particularly aroused interest. In addition, 11% of the respondents were interested in outdoor games, and 14% were interested in sports. According to the survey, young people are least interested in such a type of “game” as gambling. Among all respondents, only 7% indicated this type in their preferences. The results of the survey as a percentage are shown in Fig. 1.

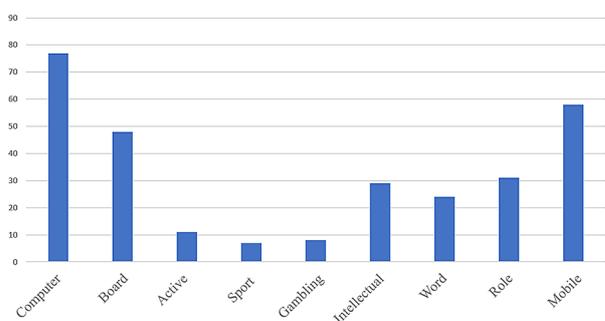


Fig. 1. Respondents' Preferences of Forms of Play.

Source: Compiled by the authors

According to 84% of the respondents, play provides an opportunity to escape from everyday life. Moreover, 58% of respondents can devote three or more hours to play on weekends, only 18% on weekdays. At the same time, 84% believe that play must possess the functions of entertainment and relaxation. The respondents consider the psychotechnical function of play to be the least important. Among the respondents, only 8% chose this function. The survey results on the functions of play in terms of percentage are shown in Fig. 2.

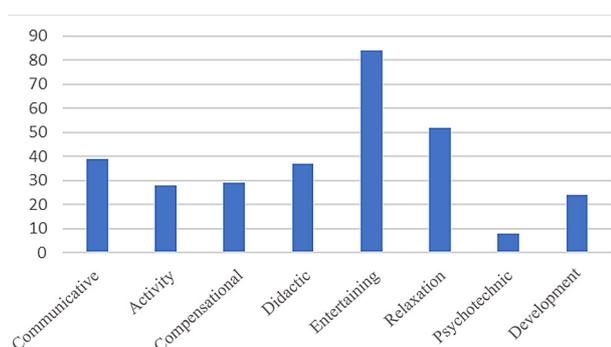


Fig. 2. Priority of Play Functions among Respondents.

Source: Compiled by the authors

This survey showed that there are no special differences in the playing preferences among the various age groups. The respondents in the age group of 14–18 years old identify computer/console and sports games as their preferred types of playing. Computer games are also preferred by two other age groups – those of 19–24 years and 25–30 years. Furthermore, the respondents noted mobile and desktop games as being significant. The respondents demonstrated their preference for spending a considerable amount of time (three hours or more) playing games only on weekends and not more than one or two hours on weekdays.

Due to the results obtained, we can conclude that there have been no studies undertaken in Russia or in other countries of preferences of various games or other types of play. Separate studies studying the preferences of the content of electronic games (computer and mobile) have allowed us to draw many conclusions similar to those of various other authors. With the development of technologies, the popularity of these types of games has increased. However, there are no significant differences shown in the time spent playing computer games among the different age groups. Computer and mobile games are an integral part of the lives of the majority of respondents. Regardless of age, the time spent playing games on weekdays does not exceed two hours a day. On weekends, the time increases to three hours or more. [2] In studies on mobile games it is noted that most of the people engaged in them are teenagers aged 13–17 years. [3] However, our pilot study showed otherwise: people pertaining to the age group of 14–18 years prefer computer and sport games. Researchers explain the popularity of mobile games among older age groups by the ubiquity of mobile devices. Young people most often turn to these games for recreation and entertainment. They have become additions to smartphones and offer everyday participation in games during their commutes to work or lunch breaks. [4; 5] As previously assumed, for the respondents playing games provides a way to relax and to escape from everyday life. At the same time, in their opinion, they should not carry any semantic load, but must remain easy for perception.

A comparative analysis of the data obtained with that of other researchers has made it possible for us to conclude that present-day young people do not attach much intellectual importance to



games, using them only for entertainment purposes. People do not have much time for playing games, especially on weekdays. The entire day is not allocated for play, even on weekends. Despite the introduction of playing activities in all spheres of life, young people do not consider play as a means for obtaining new opportunities for developing their early acquired skills. Also, the respondents have not focuses on any of the psychological functions of play.

This work is the first pilot study of the relationship of the culture of play with the

value and semantic aspects of the lives of present-day young people in Russia. Due to the data obtained, we concluded that the modern Russian youth does not perceive play or games as a serious activity that contributes to developing any skills and abilities. Games currently serve only as a means of entertainment, as a means to acquire pleasure from the process. Further research on this topic will allow us to come up with a complete picture. In order to do this, we need to expand the sample to its representativeness in the general population.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quote from: *Convention on the rights of the child*. United Nations General Assembly Resolution. No. 44/25. November 20, 1989. New York, NY.

<sup>2</sup> See: Smirnova, E. O., Sokolova, M. V. The Right to Play: A New Comment on Article 31 of the Convention on the Child's Rights. *Psychological Science and Education*. 2013. No. 1, pp. 5–10. (In Russ.)

<sup>3</sup> For more about this see: Plato. *Complete Works*. Vol. 3. Moscow, Russia: Prosveshchenie, 1994. 768 p. (In Russ.)

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle. *Complete Works*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Mysl, 1978. 384 p. (In Russ.)

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