
In Play, At Play

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Catherine M. Laing

Abstract

It is surprising for many people to learn how restricted children with cancer are, both in their daily activities as well as in the bigger, more significant events in their lives. The treatment for cancer often leaves children with significant immune suppression; exposure to any kind of virus or infection could lead to a life-threatening event. Summer camp – a “rite of passage” for many kids – would be a forgone experience were it not for specialized children’s cancer camps. This paper is intended to interpretively examine the concept of play in relation to children’s cancer camps. Much has been written about play both philosophically and scientifically, and while it might seem an obvious association, play and camp, I would suggest that like the word itself there is more complexity in this relationship than what first appears obvious. Children play at camp, of course, but there is much “at play” in them when they attend camp. As Gadamer (1960/1989) wrote, “something is going on...something is happening” (p. 104).

Keywords

cancer camp, philosophical hermeneutics, play,

The word “play” is deceptively ordinary. It likely conjures images of children, games, or a dramatic performance, however almost 100 definitions and idioms exist in reference to this word. We can play and be played, something can be at play or come into play, we can watch a play, play with words, play around, make a play for, or play along. Play is “complex and slippery” (Brown, 1998, p. 243) because the more one looks into, under, and behind the word, the more one discovers its history, roots, uses, and meanings. As a noun, play is defined as the conduct, course, or action of a game, or a recreational activity (Merriam-Webster, 2012). As a verb, it means to engage in sport or recreation; to move aimlessly about; or, to perform music or to act in

a dramatic production (Merriam-Webster). Etymologically, the origins of play are unknown but thought to come from old English *plegian* (verb), to exercise, frolic, perform music, and *plæga* (noun), recreation, exercise, any brisk activity (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2012). Throughout its etymological history, “play” has been closely connected to the world of children and make believe and has generally stayed true to its primary meaning (Online Etymology Dictionary).

Much has been written about play both

Corresponding Author:

Catherine M. Laing
Email: cmlaing@ucalgary.ca

philosophically (e.g., Gadamer, 1960/1989) and scientifically (e.g., Bjorkland & Pellegrini, 2000; Brown, 1998, 2009) to the extent that there now exists institutes and university programs devoted to the study of play. In this paper, I do not intend to comprehensively cover the vast literature on play, rather the intent is to interpretively examine the concept of play in relation to children's cancer camps. It might seem an obvious association, play and camp, however I would suggest that like the word itself there is more complexity in this relationship than what first appears obvious. Children play at camp, of course, but there is much "at play" in them when they attend camp. As Gadamer wrote, "something is going on...something is happening" (1960/1989, p. 104).

Much of my interpretation will be rooted in philosophical hermeneutics as developed by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is important to note, before further discussion, what Gadamer meant by play. Gadamer's work was written in German and later translated to English, and while *play* (the verb) and *game* (the noun), are different words in English, in German, it is the same word (e.g., play a game, *ein Spiel spielen*). Play, from a Gadamerian perspective, is not about games per se, but rather more about what Miller (1996) described as "leeway." Miller recounted a story of himself as a young academic under the mentorship of Gadamer. He recalled asking the philosopher, "what is the point of play?"

Gadamer asked me if I rode a bicycle. I said that I did. Then he asked me about the front wheel, the axle, and the nuts. He remarked that I probably knew that it was important not to tighten the nuts too tightly, else the wheel could not turn. "It has to have some play!" he announced pedagogically and a little exultantly, I thought. And then he added, ". . . and not too much play,

or the wheel will fall off." (Conclusion section, para. 4)

A leeway is an allowable margin of freedom or variation; the amount of freedom to move or act that is available (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Perhaps it could be said that the intent of this paper then, is to explore the margins of freedom and variation to move and act - to play - that children have at cancer camp; to examine the space between where their restrictive lives at the hospital and home end, and where their lives at camp begin.

Playing at Camp from a Philosophical Perspective

I have memories of cancer camp - watching these kids I knew so well outside of the hospital environment, some of who were at one point sicker than I care to remember in great detail, some whose number of days in hospital neared the number of days out of hospital, some who have since passed away. These memories (in italics) are disorienting cocktails of emotion and wonder, holding place cards in my mind of significant points in time. All are being utilized to illustrate the concept of play.

I

You could hear them coming before you could see them. The thundering clamor of the buses rolling along the bumpy dirt road leading to camp, and the voices, the cheering, the songs (a warbling hybrid of several, it seemed), the exuberation – all as if to say "we're finally here!" As the buses turned the corner and the camp came into view, the promise of the week ahead took over any remaining restraint and the sound became deafening. One by one they exited the bus until a sea of bald heads, broviacs, and feeding tubes filled the empty, waiting space of camp. There was no mistaking – these kids were here to play.

Play, according to Gadamer (1960/1989), is not to be understood as something someone does, rather the structure of play absorbs the player into itself, freeing them from the burden of initiating play. It is movement without purpose or goal, renewing itself through repetition and absorbing the player into its movement. Gadamer offered that it is only when a player loses him/herself in play that the purpose of play is fulfilled.

Play is not a disengaged exercise of subjectivity, rather it is something that has its own order and structure to which one is given over. It is not to be thought of as an object upon which a player (or spectator) acts, nor can it be understood as a subjectively determined activity. Gadamer (1960/1989) maintained that "play is really limited to presenting itself. Thus its mode of being is self-presentation" (p. 108).

It was interesting to watch the children exit the bus, some knowing what they were in for, others riding the wave of their peers' excitement. There was an element of them "being taken over," entering into a moment beyond their control – one in which they did not initiate or intend to enter – rather, it just happened to them. It was the beginning of something happening, something was at play here and looking back upon it, through this particular lens of philosophical hermeneutics, I can now see this moment differently. I can see the to and fro-ness of this moment, not from a game perspective, but from a losing of oneself to a moment, over and over, perspective. The children did not arrive at camp intending to absorb themselves, and fulfill the purpose of play by "losing themselves" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 102). Rather, "over and above their wanting and doing" (p. xxviii) they entered into the margins of freedom and variation to move and act that they did not experience in their day to day life - the leeway, the play of things. Something was clearly at play.

II

I watched her make her way up the ladder to the giant swing and giggled nervously. She was scared, you could tell. Well, I could tell, because it was the same look she would get when I had to inject L'asparaginase into her thigh. I had seen that look 24 times, we counted one day. She was strapped into a climbing harness so I knew there was no way she could get hurt, but I'm not sure she knew that. The other kids, sensing her trepidation, buoyed her on with cheers of "you can do it!" and "you're almost there!" Finally, the countdown, "3...2...1...go!" and the swing was released, sending her on a giant arc back and forth through space and time, her face awash with exuberant bliss.

Central to Gadamer's (1960/1989) notion of play is the back and forth-ness, the "to and fro motion" (p. 104), where "what characterizes this movement back and forth is that neither pole of the movement represents the goal in which it would come to rest" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 22). Play appears as movement without purpose or end point, renewing itself through repetition. It takes on the burden of initiative, absorbing the player into its movement. Play exists "to play."

The giant swing, going back and forth with a momentum of its own, requiring no initiation or continuation to keep going on the part of the swinger, brings to mind Gadamer's (1960/1989) notion of the to and fro of play. "The structure of play absorbs the player into itself" (p. 105), however as McCaffrey, Raffin Bouchal, and Moules (in press) noted, "there has to be more than one player, and there is a to-and-fro movement between players with a spontaneity and creativity in the motion of the play" (p. 12). This additional player can be metaphorical. What Gadamer is referring to is that, in order for play to occur, something needs to respond to the person playing. It can

be a person catching a ball that has been thrown by another, or it can be the giant swing responding to the girl's desire to swing.

In some cases, as in Rilke's poem that is the epitaph in Gadamer's (1960/1989) *Truth and Method*, a person is drawn into a game, into play, without initiative or intention.

Catch only what you've thrown yourself,
all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you're suddenly the catcher of a
ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your center, in an arch
from the great bridgebuilding of God:
why catching then becomes a power –
not yours, a world's.
(cited in Gadamer, p. v)

Being "the catcher of a ball thrown by an eternal partner" illustrates the nature of being drawn into play without initiation. When we are engaged, we lose our subjectivity and become "played" by the game, subject, or conversation within which we are engaged. We do not consciously think, "here I am *and* I am caught up in this game" - that awareness is lost. We have let go of ourselves being the ones responsible for conducting the way it goes. It is a curious thing, to consider what it is that gets lost when you lose yourself in something. When children are at cancer camp, I wonder if, when they lose themselves in play, they paradoxically find something else. Perhaps with this losing of themselves, they are finding acceptance, joy, and confidence.

III

"1, 2, 3, a-Larry..." *I hadn't heard that rhyme since elementary school. No, before that. I thought it was "one of those songs" my mother had taught me, dating back (as far as I was*

concerned) to the olden days. "4, 5, 6, a-Larry..." while I knew the song, the game had changed - I was trying hard to figure out these new rules. Four kids were passing three balls among each other at increasing rates of speed - seemingly trying to get each other to drop the ball. Who knows the point, really, that's irrelevant. I became comfortable with the mystery of it. "7, 8, 9, a-Larry..." they seemed so engrossed in what they were doing, so serious. They didn't hear the dinner bell ringing or the cacophony of general camp noise. They were taken over by the game. "10, a-Larry CATCH ME!"

"Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 102). Gadamer noted that there is a seriousness to play that is required to make the play "wholly play" (p. 102). This seriousness, however, belongs to the play itself versus to the player. Gadamer reminded us many times that the players are not the subject of play; "instead play merely reaches presentation through the players" (p.103). Movement as such is the essence of play, which has no goal but constantly renews and repeats itself. There is a primacy of the game over the players and of the play over the consciousness of the player (Gallagher, 1992). As such, it is not the player who plays the game, rather the game plays the player: "(A)ll playing is being played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 106).

This dominance of play over the consciousness of the player is easy to see when you look for it. I see it in my 2 year old when she plays "pretend"; I notice it in myself after the fact of being engrossed in a game, and I realize now that was what I was witnessing when I watched the game the children were playing at cancer camp. They were playing but there was also something at play in them.

I feel the need to name this - to figure out what it is that is at play during these moments in these children. Surrender, transcendence, giving-over, and vulnerability are all words that come to mind, however these words do not entirely capture what I think is happening, what is at play. Perhaps Gadamer would say the point is to realize that there *is* something at play here, and correctly naming it is not the spirit of hermeneutics. It is not about being right, rather hermeneutics is about finding an interpretation that is true of *something*. Like art, play, and games share a to and fro movement not bound to a specific goal other than fulfilling themselves (Gadamer, 1960/1989). It is what occurs when the game is in play that matters. Over and above their wanting and doing, the player is taken over by the play which has no purpose other than to bring something forth (Gadamer, 1960/1989).

IV

They were deep in conversation, it seemed. I don't know what they were talking about but it was fun to watch them as they sat on the picnic table in their own world despite being amidst the chaos of camp. In my mind, I imagined they were discussing their diseases, how they were managing chemo, what it was like to be teenage girls without hair. In reality it was probably something much more "normal" than that - boys or clothes, maybe. Their expressions changed as they took turns being the speaker and the listener, and each seemed to take the role of listener very seriously. More serious than most teenage girls do, I think. I couldn't help wondering, for the rest of that day, what were they talking about?

Gadamer (1960/1989) used the concepts of conversation and play to describe the dialogical nature of understanding. In comparing understanding with acts of dialogue and play, Gadamer suggested that the process of question and answer, listening and speaking, and

seeing others' points of view enable us to reach new understandings (Spence, 2005). When in a genuine dialogue with another, we try to understand how what the other person is saying could be right (Gadamer, 1996). In a genuine conversation the concern is with the subject matter and with its possible truth (Warnke, 1987). Neither participant claims to know the truth, rather each is open to the other's views. "Thus, being in the play of different understanding makes possible a movement, on the part of the players, towards ways of knowing that extend beyond their current understandings" (Spence, 2001, p. 627).

Watching the girls in conversation, the cadence of their dialogue having a visible, almost predictable "back and forth-ness" to it, draws attention to Gadamer's analogy of play having a dynamic and influx nature (Spence, 2001). "The naturalness of the movement, the immanently dialectical relationships and the process of playing out possibilities" (Spence, 2001, p. 627) has me play with the possibility that that is exactly what was really happening with these girls. Perhaps they were playing with possibilities, trying on each others views, listening to hear if what the other was saying was true of something for them, or coming to new understandings. Whether their conversation was "genuine" or "hermeneutic" in nature I cannot be sure. I can be sure, however, that in the back and forth, and to and fro-ness of their dialogue, something was at play.

Playing at Camp from a Scientific Perspective

V

I remember the first time it dawned on me that kids with cancer don't have the same kinds of childhoods as healthy children. You would think that would have been obvious - but it didn't occur to me until a few months into working with them. I overheard one mother

telling another about how much fun her child had at camp the previous year, and how much he was looking forward to the upcoming camp. "It was just so nice for him to do normal stuff, you know? Like healthy kids. For once he wasn't missing out on anything."

It is surprising for many people to learn how restricted children with cancer are, both in their daily activities as well as in the bigger, more significant events in their lives. The treatment for cancer often leaves children with significant immune suppression, meaning exposure to any kind of virus or infection could lead to a life-threatening event. Pediatric cancer programs teach parents how and when to limit their child's activities and exposure to others, and many families find their times of restriction far outweigh their times of freedom. School, social events, and birthdays are only some of the activities often missed because of their disease. Summer camp (for healthy children) is another opportunity these children could never conceivably attend due to the risk of exposure to infection and also because of their associated medical complexities (e.g., central lines) that require care and attention. Summer camp - a "rite of passage" for many kids - would be a forgone experience were it not for these specialized cancer camps.

The importance of cancer camps can be further substantiated by what is known about play from the scientific community. "Play, more than any other activity, fuels healthy development of children - and, the continued healthy development of adults" (Perry, Hogan, & Marlin, 2000, para.5). Our bodies, minds, and words are all involved in play, and while the nature and complexity changes as a child grows, at the heart of play is pleasure and a powerful desire to repeat such activities (Perry et al., 2000). It is through this repetition that mastery occurs, leading to accomplishment and self-confidence.

From a neuro-developmental perspective, play is the building block to learning. We learn through repetition, and because of the desire to *repeatedly* engage in play, all learning - emotional, social, motor, and cognitive - is fueled by the pleasure of play (Perry et al., 2000). Piaget (1962) proposed that it is through cooperative, social play that moral reasoning develops. The concept of play has been the focus of many research studies examining its effects on memory (Greenough & Black, 1992), growth of brain cells (Gordon, Burke, Akil, Watson, & Panskepp, 2003; Huber, Tonini, & Cirelli, 2007), intelligence (Bjorkland & Pellegrini, 2000; Pellegrini & Holmes, 2006; Stevenson & Lee, 1990), language (Fisher, 1999; Lewis, Boucher, Lupton, & Watson, 2000), problem-solving (Pepler & Ross 1981; Wyver & Spence 1999), and mathematic abilities (Wolfgang, Stannard, & Jones, 2001).

Children and adolescents lack the ability to communicate complex feelings through language. Landreth (2002) wrote that because children's language development lags behind their cognitive development, their ability to communicate complex feelings is best done through play. Emotions such as frustration, sympathy, and ambivalence are difficult for them to express because of their concrete view of the world (Landreth, 2001). Playing allows for the expression of these emotions. Play has biological, cultural, social, and psychological functions (Landreth, 2001), and is considered of such importance that it is used as a therapeutic modality (called play therapy) in pediatric hospitals around the world.

McMahon (2003) wrote "We need to play...play is not a mindless filling of time or a rest from work. It is a spontaneous and active process in which thinking, feeling and doing can flourish since they are separated from the fear of failure or disastrous consequences" (p. 197). Failing and disastrous con-

sequences are what children with cancer live with every day. Play provides not only an escape from their disease but a way in which they can continue along the journey of being a child, learning what is required of them, mastering what they need to, and finding enjoyment along the way.

Gadamer (1996) stated that it is only through experiencing illness that we understand health. I would further this idea to mean that sometimes we can arrive at understandings though the negative - understanding *what is* because of *what is not*. Perhaps examining the absence of play - playlessness - could help to further the understanding of what is at play in children who attend cancer camp. Brown (2009) offered a metaphor comparing play to oxygen - "it's all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing" (p. 6). His team's research into violent criminals (most notably Charles Whitman, the Texas tower mass murderer) found that "normal play behavior was virtually absent throughout the lives of highly violent, anti-social men, regardless of demographic" (p. 249). Similarly, Goodall (1986) wrote of the murder - cannibalism by Gombe female chimpanzees, noting that chimps displaying this rare behavior were ineffectively mothered, with early play and later socialization patterns constricted.

It would indeed be a stretch to say that children with cancer, deprived of play, will become adults with violent tendencies, but as Brown (2009) noted:

I now perceive healthy varied play in childhood as necessary for the development of empathy, social altruism and the possession of a repertoire of social behaviors enabling the player to handle stress, particularly humiliation and powerlessness. I also have found that general well-being and play are partners, and that it ac-

companies the most gifted in their adult achievements: Perhaps it allows access to the giftedness we all possess. (p. 250)

Perhaps it is more responsible to say that children with cancer who are deprived of play because of the limitations of their disease may not be getting the same chances as their peers to learn the skills they will need in adulthood, to learn about themselves and others, and to reach their full potential. Some may defy the odds and do it anyway - but I wonder, why would we take that chance?

Conclusion

Benner (1994) suggested that the understanding gained in interpretive inquiry is key to "becoming more effectively, skillfully, or humanely engaged in practice" (p. xv) and is a particularly useful approach when seeking to understand things that are taken for granted or assumed. Play, I believe, is one of those taken for granted things. It is all around us, until it is not. Like oxygen, its absence is noticed, not its presence. While this interpretive analysis was done without data or text generated through research, it has not been *ex nihilo*. My memories of camp and practice, combined with the lens of philosophical hermeneutics and other play research, illuminate the concept of play in such a way as to further the understanding of this concept (play) in this setting (cancer camp). I have likely not answered the question of exactly *what is* at play in these children when they attend camp, but it is my hope that this comes to light with my upcoming research.

One dimension of play that I have not addressed in this paper but warrants consideration nonetheless is that of the ethics of play. Vilhauer (2010) addressed this, noting that

(P)lay has a global relevance in philosophical hermeneutics...play elucidates

the very process of understanding in general - the understanding which stretches through all our hermeneutic experience, including our encounters with art, with text, with tradition in all its forms, with others in dialogue, and which even constitutes our very mode of being in the world. (pp. xiii-xiv)

The ethics of play, according to Gadamer (summarized by Vilhauer), have three considerations. First, there are ethical conditions that must be met for genuine dialogue to succeed. Second, there is an implicit value claim in Gadamer's work that genuine play is ultimately beneficial to our development as human beings. Third, Gadamer's theory of understanding as a process of play is meant as practical philosophy to guide us in relations with others so that we may understand better. While beyond the scope of this paper, it is perhaps worth consideration for future researchers to address the ethics of play with respect to children with serious illness.

Gadamer (1960/1989) stated that "hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness... *the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between*" (p. 295). It is fitting to think of play as existing in this "in-between," in the margins and leeway of familiarity and strangeness. In many ways, it is in the in-between that children and their families exist once they receive the diagnosis of childhood cancer. I believe it behooves those of us interested in working with these families to find ways to make it easier to live in this liminal space.

We are no longer able to approach this like an object of knowledge, grasping, measuring and controlling. Rather than meeting us in our world, it is much more a world into which we ourselves are drawn. [It] possesses its own worldliness and, thus, the center of its own Being so long

as it is not placed into the object-world of producing and marketing. The Being of this thing cannot be accessed by objectively measuring and estimating; rather, the totality of a lived context has entered into and is present in the thing. And we belong to it as well. Our orientation to it is always something like our orientation to an inheritance that this thing belongs to, be it from a stranger's life or from our own. (Gadamer, 1994, p. 192)

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