

# The Structure and Variants of a Preschooler's Narrative Play

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The paper discusses the concept of children's play in a broad and narrow sense. In a broad sense, play is viewed as a free, emotionally-charged activity without enforcement that includes spontaneous testing of oneself and play content. A more accurate scientific definition of play was suggested by D. B. Elkonin who regarded the action role play as the highest and most developed play form which reproduces social relationships among people. The authors believe that the latter does not cover many widespread kinds of narrative (action) play where the children do not simulate the actions of adults. Therefore, following L. S. Vygotsky, the divergence between the imaginary and real situations is considered to be the main criterion of narrative play as the leading activity of a preschooler. The structure of narrative play is believed to include additional components: objects (toys), time and space of the play, interaction with the partner and the position of the player. Based on different player's positions, a typology of narrative plays is proposed. It includes seven variants: traditional role play, role play via a toy, individual role play, directed individual and directed joint plays, procedural play, and event-driven play where the child is acting from a real position. Recognition of the imaginary situation as the main criteria of play makes it possible to consider those play types as independent forms of a preschooler's leading activity.

**Keywords:** play, narrative play, imaginary situation, play structure, objects of play, space and time of play, interaction of partners, directed play, event-driven play.

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The cultural-historical and activity theories view play as the leading activity of a preschooler. It is within play that the major new formations of this age period are being shaped and most effectively developed: creative imagination, image thinking, voluntary behavior, self-awareness, needs and motivations, etc. In today's educational science, the significance of play, while by no means denied, is yet considered as purely didactic. Play is being utilized for acquiring new competences, perceptions, forming useful skills, etc. However, play's didactic significance in a narrow sense is quite limited; it is far from being the best instructional technique. Play can surely be used for purely didactic ends, but then its major and specific functions will be pushed to the background or eliminated completely. Play is by no means an exercise in any particular function. It is a preschooler's way of life, a principal tool of development and formation of specifically human faculties.

The fact that play is a valuable factor in child development is emphasized across the board, by psychologists, educators and lawyers alike. This term in its different versions ("play form", "play tools", "play techniques") is present in many programs of preschool education and pervades all the sections. Setting conditions for play activity is viewed as a priority for preschool institutions. The Convention on the Rights of the Child postulates the right to play among other vital rights.

Such an intensive and various use of the term invites an excursion back to its definition, so that the specific characteristics of child play can be identified. It appears essential to discuss the notion of play one more time, and to define it through a number of properties that can serve as benchmarks in assessing the presence and the quality of this particular activity in child's life. In that, we should focus on following aspects:

- since play definitions vary, it is unclear what the right to play means and how we can monitor if this right is observed

- is it possible to accurately and unambiguously distinguish play from what is not play, and in what way exactly can we determine if pre-school facilities under consideration provide sufficient conditions for play activity?

- how to assess the degree of mastering play?

Answering these questions will be of great importance in the context of early age education. Let us try to examine major characteristics of play and determine the specific ones for this kind of child activity.

#### **Imaginary situation as the criterion of play**

Even D. B. Elkonin wrote:

"The word 'play' is not a strictly scientific concept. ... up till now we do not have a satisfactory definition and explanations of the existing play forms" [5, p. 308].

The situation changed little since that time: the term "play" remains polysemantic and is used in different contexts. Despite its ambiguity, this term found its solid place in child psychology and preschool education where it is used both in its broad and narrow sense.

In a broad sense, play is usually an antonym of work. Play does not produce any practical results, even if there is a product, e.g. a structure built of blocks. However, with such a definition, play can mean any educating activity, didactic playing organized by adults or any adult-supervised activity. Such a broad usage of the term "play" results in fuzzy boundaries of this term and, hence, discredits the entire activity. Very often now the teachers encounter the phenomenon when the children passively wait for the adult's suggestions, and when the adult suggests that they play the children go to sit at the table with didactic toys.

At the same time, in the history of psychology and philosophy, play is defined through the following characteristics:

- free activity without enforcement;
- emotional uplift with the pleasure drawn on activity, not on its result;
- spontaneity, improvisation, active testing of oneself and the subject of play.

If the child activity shows these features it may indicate play in a broad sense of the term. In this broad context, play may comprise free manipulation with toys, independent experimenting, games with rules, etc. At the same time, play cannot include any activity under the adult direction, supervision or enforcement, even if toys or fairy tale allusions are used.

Therefore, the right for play presupposes time and space for a free, emotionally-charged, spontaneous child activity.

A more accurate, scientific definition for play was given by D.B. Elkonin who studied a specific type of play, narrative role play, rather than play in general, and regarded it as the highest, expanded and the most developed play form. He wrote that this play “reproduces social relationships among people outside the situation of immediate utilitarian activity” [5, p. 20]. However, this definition drastically reduces the number of child activities defined by this term. It misses many widely spread types of the narrative play where the children do not take adult roles and do not simulate their actions: directed play, individual play with dolls, animal-imitating play, etc.

In this connection, it is worth mentioning L. S. Vygotsky’s paper [2] where he, as is commonly known, defined the main characteristic of child play as the *divergence between the real and imaginary situations*:

“A child in a play starts acting ‘not from an object but from a thought’, not in a real but in an illusory, imaginary situation”.

Due to these characteristics of play, it serves as a base for the forming and effectively develop the major new characteristics of this age period: creative imagination, image thinking, self-awareness, etc. The development of these characteristics facilitates the buildup of consciousness and the internal plane of action as specifically human features. Following L. S. Vygotsky, we believe that the establishment of an imaginary (illusory) situation is the main specific property of play distinguishing it from any other activity. The role is a specific case of the imaginary situation (“illusory «I»”) and can characterize the classic, expanded role play described in great detail by D. B. Elkonin. However, there are other narrative plays where the substitution of the position (i. e. role) does not happen but there exists an imaginary situation where a child acts ‘not from an object but from a thought’ and where there is content (a plot), i. e. a certain sequence of events. Therefore, those games though not role plays are still narrative.

The word “illusory” here is understood as a child’s deliberate journey beyond the perceived reality with assigning new meanings

to it, i. e. what the children call “make-believe” (or “as if”). It is not an illusory situation, it is a simultaneous holding to both real and imaginary situation [1]. This is how we distinguish it from a fantasy: the latter is devoid of an image (visual plane), the expression of the inner content. A loss of one of the planes (real or imaginary) confirms the absence of the illusory situation, hence, the absence of play.

Unlike the role, illusory situation is universal, common for all variants of the narrative play and comprises, in an inseparable unity, affective-motivational and operation-technical components.

It should be emphasized that imaginary situation in play exists in the child’s practical actions (individual or joint) rather than in his/her imagination. It “rests” on different supports; each support in play, apart from its real existence, acquires a new meaning imparted by the child. In this sense, the illusory situation is created and exists through different aspects which could be considered play’s structural components.

#### **Structural components of play**

In the structure of the narrative play role, D. B. Elkonin isolated the *play plot* and the *play content*. The plot is the part of reality that a child reproduces in play. Apart from it, the content reflects the main element that a child perceives in human relationships, thus reflecting a child’s more or less deep perception of human relationships [5]. However, these characteristics are clearly insufficient for the objectives facing the current practice, i. e. for the description of different play types and for suggesting a typology of child games. This paper is an attempt to portray a structure of a narrative play in a broader way, by including different components into it, each with component presented in two planes: real and ideal. The components include: *subject plane, space and time of play, interaction with partners, and child’s position in play*. The intensity and content of each aspect determine the character of play and could be used to analyze its specific type. They are reviewed below in greater detail.

**Subject material of play** (toys and replacing objects). This aspect traditionally is

omitted from play structure despite the fact that toys and other objects are the most common tools for creating an illusory situation and are indispensable for any child play.

Toys are the most common play objects. In a strict sense of the word, a toy (i. e. a play tool) is an object that makes it possible for a child to travel beyond the perceived situation. Among the toys, there are *image toys, operating objects and space markers*.

Image toys give a possibility to animate them or make them alive and to impart child's experience and feelings to them. The same functions could be seen not only in the image toy but in the so-called role attributes (caps/hoods, bandages, collars) which should help the child feel a different person, acquire a new role position.

Operating objects (toy sabers, kitchen ware) and space markers (houses, trees, bridges) help the child to accept and maintain play situation, to create and hold the illusory world.

A possibility to include objects into play and to variably use them is the most important feature of play. Sometimes the place of an object in play structure is determined by the play type (directed or role play) or reflects a plot important for a child (e.g. a treasure search).

**Space of play.** This is an area occupied in the process of play, "scale" (much/little space) and other spatial characteristics (tight/roomy, far/close, high/low, etc.). Through these characteristics, the space is differentiated and justifies (substantiates) the actions. For example, it is necessary to "go to a store" because it is at some distance from home. If the distance becomes an important feature of the space for the children, they will mark this distance in their play (by action or word) though in reality "the store" may be just next to the "home". Adherence to the spatial boundaries in play and the desire to mark them testifies to the mature ideas about the space. Besides, the space organized through objects-supports or "space markers" [3] shows the internal space of a child's personality and means of communicating it. For instance, the study of T.V. Pivnenko [4] demonstrates that the children who are not accepted by peers have similar features of space

arrangement in play: seize too large a space, strictly mark it or, on the contrary, play in too tight a space and are not prepared to fight for it.

**Time of play.** This characteristic is present in play in three forms;

1. The time of the narrative is the time depicted in the play, i.e. at what particular time a portrayed event is taking place (e.g., they could play "winter" or "night") and its duration. This duration is the depicted one, not the real duration, i.e. a child states in play that the event lasts for a long-long time. The narrative time reflects, first, how well a child mastered the category of time, and, second, can reflect some significant motives. For instance, a boy, within different narratives (cooking food, arrival of guests and others), plays the motive of expectation and makes it into the subject of play ("we have to wait a little bit longer", "only short time is left", "will not come soon", etc.);

2. Organizational time, i.e. planning and implementation. It is well-known that the ability to plan play is very small at the beginning but in the process of play development the planning period increases and sometimes the entire play turns into planning. The assessment of play activity evaluates the time range of planning and its steps (or generalization), whether the implementation followed the plan, whether the real time affected the organization of play (e.g. "compression" of play while keeping the content intact to be able to complete play);

3. Real time, i.e. the time that can be objectively measured, the real duration of activity, reiteration of the narrative, time of planning, discussion, etc. The duration and reiteration of the narrative (action) are indicative of the individual significance of a motive for the child, whether related to mastering a motive or living it through as affectively significant.

**Interaction in play.** Interaction with others in play takes place on two levels: within the narrative (on the level of role-driven or real relationships, as in an event-driven play) or outside the narrative. On the one hand, the children communicate within an illusory situation, on the other hand, they communicate about this situation. In the joint play activity, they go from one level to the other all the time;

when they go to the level of role-based relationships the children deliberately change their manners, voice, intonation, etc. This can show that preschoolers clearly distinguish between role-driven and real relationships, and the real relationships are geared towards a common cause – play.

The term of role-driven interaction as a structural element and as a unit of analysis of play was introduced by L.I. Elkoninova [6] who emphasized its two-step nature. The two-step interaction, per our observation, can be of a different character and can find a different expression in the personality of different children. For instance, there are children who are predisposed to challenges in the play and do not accept the response of their partners. There are other children whose challenge is not directed to the partner but rather to the alliance “I + partner” and calls for joint response. L.I. Elkoninova does not find two steps in the real interaction of children. However, the real communication between children about play can also reveal two steps (a challenge and a response): the children make proposals, express their displeasure with the partner’s act, discuss play and plan it, etc. It is important to stress that play interaction does not necessarily include the role interaction since the play situation can be maintained via other elements, e.g. illusory events, space, etc.

**The position of the player.** The position of the child in play is among the most important characteristics of play. Position here means the place occupied by the proper “Ego” of the player (self-conception). In the experiment of D.B. Elkonin and V.A. Nedospasova who studied the development of decentration, the position of the player was called “conditionally dynamic”. However, D.B. Elkonin emphasized that such position is present only in a collective role play. Individual play, including playing with a doll “...does not have a strict necessity of changing the position, or of coordinating your point of view with the points of view of other play participants. Possibly, play in this case does not function as a “moral and cognitive decentration” but, on the contrary, substantiates a personal, one and only point of view of a child on subjects and relationships, con-

firms an egocentric position” [5, p. 281]. In our opinion, any play develops the decentration. In L. S. Vygotsky’s words, “in play, a child gets to know his/her «I»” (p. 291). By creating alternative points of identification (the other «I») and relating him/herself to it, the child isolates and discovers his/her «I». In a play, due to the divergence between the semantic and visual planes, it becomes possible to act (“from the thought, not from the object” (L. S. Vygotsky), from the child’s own design rather than from the situation. Such a differentiation of «I» represents the decentration mechanism: it is impossible to acquire a position of the other without finding a similar position in oneself, and, vice versa, the more diversified our «I» is, the easier it is for us to put oneself into the position of the other.

The position of «I» differs greatly in different play types. Since the playing child, its creator, is the center and the source of play, we believe that the position of the player can serve the basis for the classification of play types. The structural components of the play discussed above make it possible to develop a typology of play and to show a unique structure of each type.

#### Typology of narrative plays

The player can assume a role, directing or real position. Consequently, three types of a narrative play can be distinguished, with several variants in each type. A brief characteristic of play types follows below.

**Role play** presupposes taking up a role and acting on behalf of the role. by taking a role, the child merges with the other, gets immersed into the other and simultaneously views her/himself as a spectator of the play that takes place [1]. The child here occupies simultaneously two positions: real and portrayed. The child’s «I» is conditionally identified with the position. Role plays have several variants.

1. *Role play* – “classic” kind of the play described in great detail by D.B. Elkonin and many other researchers of play. In the structure of this play type, the illusory situation calls for the interaction with partners in two planes, real and role-driven. L.I. Elkoninova and T.V. Bazhanova greatly contributed to the un-

derstanding of the play situation by expanding D.B. Elkonin's concept of the play unit: it is now defined as "...not one isolated role but the relationship between two roles (role action that induces a response action, meaningful only as a response)" [6, p. 316].

2. *Role play via a toy*. Here the role is assigned to an image toy (a doll or any other toy) and is implemented through it. It is a very widespread play type today, encountered much more often than others. What is interesting here is the phenomenon of choosing a toy as one's representation for the partner in play. The structure of such play becomes more complicated because role-driven communication is made indirect by the doll. The latter takes up the words, actions and feeling of the child, and it "addresses" those to the partner – a doll of the other child.

3. *Role play without a partner*. Here a child assumes the role and interacts with the imaginary partner. This type of play is different because there is no real interaction and the role behavior is peculiar: it is represented by one child only; one child impersonates many roles and communicates as one or the other character. Such play requires minimum of objects and attributes and takes place, primarily, in the internal plane.

**Directed plays.** These are narrative plays where a child does not assume a specific role but acts on behalf of different toys, i.e. delegates the roles to toys and builds relationships among them. In such plays the child's Ego identifies, for the purpose of our discussion, rather with the topic, subject, story, e.g. with the conflict among characters. The position of the player is alienated and distanced from a specific role; it identifies rather with the sequence of events. The player looks at what is going on from above and assumes, in turn, the positions of different toy characters but does not coincide with any.

Directed plays comprise:

1) *individual directed play*, when the player takes up a position of a director of the events rather than a participant involved in the events. A child is above the situation, outside it, looking at it, almost literally, from above and from aside. The structure of this play type is similar

to the structure of the role play without a partner: role interaction is created by one player. The difference lies in its "indirect" character, implemented through dolls.

2) *joint directed play* calls for the role interaction with a partner through toys and at the same time for a regular directed play, i.e. the structure of such play will include a) real interaction of partners, b) role play via toys, and c) role play via toys represented by one child.

**Event-driven play** is a narrative play where a child is participating from the *position of the real «I»*. Here a child is acting on his/her own behalf but can communicate with a doll, use replacement objects and exist in the portrayed time and space. All of the above allow regarding this activity as play despite the absence of the conventional position of the player.

This type of play includes:

1. *procedural play* which is characterized by the absence of the role interaction. Illusory situation may reflect the elements of a relationship. For instance, a girl named Tanya is "make-believe" angry with her doll, i.e. the structure of this play will demonstrate not the generalized role or history but individual play elements – objects and/or play interaction while the play space, role, etc. are absent.

2. *event-driven play*. Here a child participates in the play from a real position, i.e. remains "her/himself" in the play situation. For instance, the child plays as if she/he met robbers (pirates) or befriended ghosts, or traveled to a fairy land. In this play a real interaction is also possible, i.e. the children can *play* together without assuming roles. For instance, two children escape the "flood", climb onto a sofa, hop onto chairs, "panic", and come up with a rescue plan. Or, another example given by L. S. Vygotsky: "...the children are sitting round the real table and can play dinner or... children that do not go to bed can say: 'Let's play as if it were night and we had to go to bed' [2, p. 220].

If a child plays alone he/she, more often than not, will preserve the real position and also play a role (of pirates or ghosts), therefore, the resulting play interaction is rather peculiar: "real «I»" is interacting with "play «I»".

These are, in general, the main variants of a narrative play, each having its own unique combination of structural elements. It is important to emphasize once again that all variants have one thing in common: the presence of an illusory situation. We believe that the structural components of play and its types described above allow a more accurate definition of the activity criteria as well as broaden the concept of the leading activity by including other play variants into it. The recognition of the illusory

situation as the main criteria of play makes it possible to regard procedural, directing and role-absent plays as absolutely independent plays with their own important potential for child development. These plays (directing, role play with a toy, etc.) are very natural for children and it is wrong to view them outside the leading activity. When supported, these plays may enrich a child's life and its organization in accordance with age-specific characteristics of a preschooler.

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