Cultural Work on the Kindergarten Playground: Articulating the Ground of Play

Abstract

Children's play clearly demonstrates the social construction that lies at the center of the developmental process. An interpretive analysis of children's play on the preschool-kindergarten playground is used to explore the way that a play group establishes a ground for children's play—a practically grasped, shared sense of reality. Establishing the ground of play entails an active reworking of the playground's material resources and involves a system for the production and exchange of valued goods. Analysis of the cultural work of play helps us to understand how everyday social activity reproduces the social order that conditions it and leads to the development of particular kinds of self-understanding. There is evidence that character within the game is carried outside the ground of play in which it is produced, allowing for an account of development not as the individual construction of cognitive structures, but as the social production of human individuals.

Developmental psychology has begun to abandon the individualism and organicism of previous theorizing [Dowd, 1990]. One of the aims of the research described here is to contribute to a new account of the developmental process—an account of human development not as an individual's construction of cognitive structures (a genetic epistemology), but as a collective social production through participation in social institutions, a production that goes hand in hand with the reproduction of those institutions (a telic ontology). This analysis is 'critical' in that it seeks to articulate conditions for the possibility of the genera-
tional continuity and change of a society. The project described here is one of a series of ‘development-in-action’ studies in which children’s development is approached not as the logical unfolding of cognitive-developmental stages but as a situated accomplishment – the product of adults’ and children’s interactions in everyday settings [Packer, 1983, 1985a; Packer and Richardson, 1991; Packer and Scott, 1992].

The general shape of this account of development has become clear over the past 20 years through the work of contributors who seek an account of the mutual constitution of person and social order that goes beyond the social construction of knowledge of that social order [Dannefer and Perlmutter, 1990]. Such an account differs from ‘social constructionism’ which ‘is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live’ [Gergen, 1985, p. 266]. Social constructionism overlooks two other moments in the ‘social construction of reality’ pointed out by Berger and Luckmann [1966] – externalization and objectification. Berger and Luckmann articulate the active dialectical social process whereby people establish, maintain, and modify their social reality as they are simultaneously formed and shaped in their identity. They distinguish three moments in this process – externalization (in which the social order is produced by human activity), objectivation (this product attains the character of objectivity), and internalization (rejection of the objectivated social world into consciousness). Social construction of knowledge about the world is an important moment in this dialectical process, and Berger and Luckmann draw upon the social phenomenology of Schutz [Schutz and Luckmann, 1974, 1983] to emphasize that ‘society as subjective reality’ had been neglected by a sociol-

ogy that failed to appreciate how human conduct is guided by ‘whatever passes for “knowledge” in a society’ [p. 3]. But this knowledge is significant only as it partakes in a material process whereby ‘a taken-for-granted “reality” congeals for the man in the street’ [p. 3]. While one may disagree with the lingering dualism of their language, the point is a convincing one that in accounting for development we must attend to the material reproduction of the social order and the social production of personal identity, at the same time that knowledge is shaped.

Such an account requires an adequate conception of social structure. It is on this count that Giddens [1976] in turn finds a need to correct Berger and Luckmann and the microethnographic approach of ethnomethodology, ‘sociology without society’ [Mayrl, 1973]:

The production of society ... is always and everywhere a skilled accomplishment of its members. While this is recognized by ... schools of interpretative sociology ... they have not managed to reconcile such an emphasis with the equally essential thesis, dominant in most deterministic schools of social thought, that if men make society, they do not do so merely under conditions of their own choosing. In other words, it is fundamental to complement the idea of the production of social life with that of the social reproduction of structures [pp. 126–127].

Giddens’s theory of ‘structuration’ offers an account of how human agents and social institutions are constituted through the recurrent practice engendered by their relationship: ‘Explication of this relation [between action and institution] ... comprises the core of an account of how it is that the structuration (production and reproduction across time and space) of social practices takes place’ [Giddens, 1982, p. 8]. In Giddens’s account, social practices are organized recursively, so that structure is both medium and outcome of the practices it organizes via ‘feedback relations
of unintended consequences' [1982, p. 10]. But Giddens views speech as the paradigmatic example of a practical activity that is both produced by a subject and constrained by a system whose reproduction is an unanticipated consequence of that production – the language system. Speech illustrates what he calls this 'duality of structure', drawing attention to the fact that the structures Giddens considers are not material ones but rather exist 'out of time and space' as 'systems of generative rules and resources' [1976, p. 127] that are 'instantiated in social systems, but having only a “virtual existence”' [1982, p. 9]. But this is still a 'cognitive order' [1976, p. 122] and, as Thompson [1981] remarks, the analogy between social structure and the structure of language 'cannot easily account for the exercise of power and the occurrence of conflict ... [or] the possibility of swift and radical change, [and] can throw little light on the social mechanisms [that generate ideology]' [pp. 143–144].

It is necessary, then, to attend to a social order within which people occupy different positions and, as a result, hold different and conflicting concerns and interests. The social system of democratic capitalism cannot be understood without analysis of the distinct social positions it defines and is defined by. These definitions shape development directly and indirectly [Dowd, 1990]. Explicating the mutual constitution of person and social world requires recognition that the person is situated within this world and thus has partial knowledge of it from a particular perspective, as well as recognition that practice is the emergence point of both tacit knowledge and social structure. As a result, our conception of the person is not limited to that of ‘knower’. The desiderata of such a theory are, first, a recovery of the human subject 'as a reasoning, acting being', and second, the avoidance of a 'relapse into subjectivism' by an explication of the constitution of consciousness as always practically involved in a particular situation.

A distinction must be maintained between the social order as a whole and social institutions that make possible particular social relations [Thompson, 1981]. A culturally and historically informed developmental theory attends to the character of the specific institutions that have arisen for the business of producing persons, and the cultural fields supported within these institutions. The dynamic interplay of human agents – students and teachers – and regulative state institutions – schools – is well-captured by Willis' [1977] description of how schools reproduce labor power:

The state school in advanced capitalism, and the most obvious manifestation of oppositional working class culture within it, provide us with a central case of mediated class conflict and of class reproduction in the capitalist order. It is especially significant in showing us a circle of unintended consequences which act finally to reproduce not only a regional culture but the class culture and also the structure of society itself [p. 60].

Playing for Willis the part that speech does for Giddens, labor power is a human capacity and a mode of identity, in addition to being the motive force that reproduces the capitalist order and its source of value:

Labour power ... is the main mode of active connection with the world: the way par excellence of articulating the innermost self with external reality. It is in fact the dialectic of the self to the self through the concrete world [Willis, 1977, p. 2, italics in original].

Willis explains how labor power is forged ironically at school in the culture of a group of oppositional boys – 'the lads'. 'Culture' is used here both ironically – it is indeed a 'common culture' [Willis, 1990] that 'the lads' fashion – and as an abstract term to refer to a level of shared activity, a group production, an active and, in this case, oppositional interplay between agent and institution. For Willis
[1977], the material work of reproduction occurs not at the individual level but at the cultural level, of which the small group is the basic element:

I view the cultural not simply as a set of transferred internal structures (as in the usual notions of socialization) nor as the passive result of the action of dominant ideology downwards (as in certain kinds of marxism), but at least in part as the product of collective human praxis [p. 4].

Through participation in production of this culture, 'the lads' learn to labor'. They learn to find value in a specific mode of social being and activity and learn to understand themselves as the adults they will become:

Cultural forms provide the materials towards, and the immediate context of, the construction of subjectivities and the confirmation of identity. It [sic] provides as it were the most believable and rewarding accounts for the individual, his future and especially for the expression of his/her vital energies. It seems to 'mark' and 'make sense' of things [p. 173].

The production of the person amounts to an alignment with and affirmation of a manner of acting and existing, in the context of an informal construction of group and personal identity. This production, and the reproduction of the institutions in which this activity takes place, are not intended outcomes, nor a simple unintended consequence. Rather, they are ironic outcomes, quite the opposite of those intended by 'the lads' or the teaching staff. Willis [1977] provides a subtle account of the way that the activities and relationships of the everyday social life of 'the lads' are skilled productions that amount to a dynamic, dialectical interplay between them and the school. The reproduction of the institution and the reworking of identities are indirect and ironic consequences.

Culture on the Playground: 'These beasts that have lasers'

The research described in this article explores children's play in a preschool kindergarten playground in light of the general considerations just outlined. They provide an interpretive foerstructre [Heidegger, 1927/1962; Packer, 1985b, Caputo, 1987] in terms of which the concrete material of everyday life on the playground can be interpreted and articulated. My aim is to explicate the way that the children construct a social order in their play and how, in turn, this order plays a role in the construction of identity. In the playgroups formed spontaneously by young children on the school playground, we find a particularly clear instance of the social construction and person production that lies at the center of the developmental process.

The material that follows is derived from visits to the kindergarten class of a private preschool in the San Francisco Area over a 2-year period. Most of the children in this class were Caucasian; most had parents with professional occupations. Each child in two successive cohorts of the class was videotaped for about an hour on the playground three times during the school year. The child was cognizant of and granted permission for the videotaping. The child wore a shirt containing a small wireless microphone that made possible detailed transcription of the child's conversation.

The most popular boy - Josh (a pseudonym) - in the first year's cohort of 15 boys and 9 girls was often at the center of a group of boys playing together. On one occasion, Josh initiated a game called 'Laser Beasts' that was characteristic of the boys' play in its free-ranging use of the playground and its exclusion of girls. The boys played Laser Beasts for almost 45 minutes, after which the theme segued to 'Animal Star Wars' and then wound down to a
turn on the tire swing. During this time, Josh wove Brendan and David into the game, becoming both their leader and caretaker. Josh was 5 years, 11 months old, Brendan 5 years old, and David 5 years, 4 months old. The analysis in depth of this one extended episode of play offers a more complete understanding of the structure and dynamics of accomplished play than would aggregating episodes. Of particular interest to examine were how Josh maintained his central position among the children and how the boys reproduced their collective position in the children’s social order, which was divided along gender lines. [The play of girls and of a group of oppositional boys has also been examined; see Packer and Richardson, 1991; Packer, 1993.]

The Ground Develops: ‘I don’t like the look of this place!’

As he entered the playground on the day this episode took place, Josh initiated play by proposing characters for himself and Brendan, his companion and playmate – ‘Laser Bat’ and ‘Laser Shark’:

\[Josh is walking with Brendan across the playground towards the climbing structure.\] Josh: That’s a shark. And I’m gonna be Laser Bat – that’s a bat. Which has a – a pack – pack for its laser.

The guiding genre of Laser Beasts was a combination of video-game and epic science-fiction fantasy, but the precise plot of the game was never defined explicitly; the boys had surprisingly little use for ‘initial planning negotiations’ [Garvey, 1990]. The game seemed not to require such definition, perhaps because of the children’s familiarity with elements of the assumed genre, but also because the creative unfolding of plot over time was a central characteristic of the play. Definition was managed tacitly through the activity. Even when other children were curious to know what the game was about, only a vague definition was forthcoming:

Richard: [walking up to Josh and Brendan] What are you – what are you playing?
Josh: Laser Beasts.
Richard: What’s that?
Josh: These beasts that have lasers.

The lack of precise definition permitted a flexible and open-ended course to the activity. Elements of the plot could be, and were, challenged, even though the overarching choice of genre was taken for granted and never called into question.

The next development of the game occurred as, after agreeing on their characters, Josh and Brendan climbed to the top of the climbing structure and established their resources, which took the form of hardware. Josh simply demonstrated his own, then recounted the extent of Brendan’s engineering, weaving this announcement into a further plot development:

Josh: Why don’t I laser that out? Ugh, psshhh. I lased – I lasered the propeller out, Brendan.
Brendan: (Bad)\(^1\) jet engine. (Shot) jet engine.
Josh: You shoot jet engines off your – your jet engines are hooked onto your arm and you go like this – psshhh [threatening out his arms] and they shoot – but I have a little laser hooked into my pack. [Josh jumps down off the climbing structure and walks across the sand. Brendan soon follows.]

Brendan later elaborated on his equipment:

Brendan: I really do have – I have jet engines for real, up – up on my shoulders, and lasers that come on my wrists.

\(^1\) Parentheses mark uncertain utterances.
Josh now set what was to be the predominant tone for their shared reality with an expression of foreboding and threat:

Josh: (looking around him, at the sand) I don’t like the look of this place. Laser Shark?
Brendan: Yes?
Josh: My name is Laser Bat. I don’t like the look of this place. Um, I don’t like the look of this place. Looks like a – the Mediterranean to me.
Brendan: I’ll blow it up! [Brendan lasers the area.]
Josh: No! [He pushes Brendan’s arm down.] Quit that. [They start to walk behind the climbing structure.] Sheesh!

Next, an explicit challenge was constructed by Josh from material provided by Brendan:

Brendan: You know what? [He trips and falls.] I don’t like those little things that grow along the ground.
Josh: Jump the pits, that’s where they live. [Josh jumps.] Jump that. They live in there. You gotta jump.

Genre, characters, resources, tone, and challenge established, Laser Beasts ranged widely across the playground, as the boys raced from one piece of equipment to another, around the equipment room, up onto the hill and under the trees, unrooted except in their relations to one another. Josh was generally in the lead.

David joined them, and all three boys contributed to the uncovering of new threats, introducing ‘shark hunters’ ‘bionics,’ and ‘moray eels’.

[Josh and Brendan return to the climbing structure and clamber up.]
Brendan: Aghhh – I hate – I don’t want any more blood getting sucked fr – from the Morays.
Josh: There is no Morays around here – or was it? Or what was – I know what you’re feeling – you’re feeling the spears. Come on, I’ll show you.
David: [having climbed up the back way] Shark hunters!

Josh: God, what? Shark hunters? Come on. I’m going – I’m going to change. Excuse me but I need a change for a minute. [Josh and the others climb back down the back of the structure.]
Brendan: I do too. I’m not gonna...
Josh: Pthhh, Pthhh, Pthhh. [Josh ‘flies’ to the lawn and Brendan follows.]
Josh: I’m up in the air you know. Not easy – [He continues to run.] Jet engines. It’s the bionics! [Josh and Brendan sit on the slides and rest.]
David: [walking up to them] Did you, did you guys say bionics?
Josh: Yeah, I said bion – bionics [sounds irritated].
David: Oh, they’re my worst en...
Josh: [standing up and pointing across the playground] Over there.
David: They’re my worst enemies.
Josh: Come on, let’s go. [He and David run across the playground. Brendan catches up. David runs the other way, and Josh and Brendan follow to the slide, where Josh stops running, and so does Brendan.]
Josh: [sitting down on the slide facing Brendan] This is what’s happening. The Morays have got you. The shark hunters have got you.
Brendan: I think the Morays...
David: [approaching them] Can you get me outta here? Can you get me outta here? The Morays are trying to suck my blood.

New threats and dangers appeared throughout the game, but the plot remained the same. Each challenge was heroically confronted and dealt with at great risk, often with damage or injury sustained. This damage however, was always subsequently recovered from or repaired.

Observable in this activity is the accomplishment of the work undertaken in children’s play – the construction of a world. For the short term, play redefines the real and the unreal, within a restricted compass. The playground has been reworked as a lived reality that is engaged practically rather than known reflectively. In abstract terms, this group of boys has established through their exchanges a shared sense of place and purpose, an understanding of characters and their resources and powers, and norms of accepted action. We see
construction of what Schutz [1970] called 'a finite province of meaning' or 'an order of reality' – a world with a specific accent of reality within which certain types of character exist, each with a characteristic mode of activity. In Berger and Luckmann's [1966] terms, we see the congealing of a taken-for-granted reality. The world of Laser Beasts is produced and defined through the children's actions and simultaneously provides, in a reciprocal manner, the context in which those acts have meaning. Individual acts of play presuppose this transformation of reality and a socially agreed-upon, practical sense of the world. The process involves the construction of a 'ground' in that it provides the basis upon which play characters and their actions move, along with the terms that define the meaning of these actions. It is on this ground that particular acts of play can be launched and make sense. This ground fades into the 'background' as a taken-for-granted element of children's play. For this reason, it has not been a focus of research on children's play. It is what lies within the frame rather than the framing activity [Kane and Furth, 1993] that is examined in this article.

The reality of other forms of pretense is assimilated to the Laser Beasts' ground. Josh ran past Sam, who raised his arms, bear-like, and growled at them. 'Uh-oh!' cried Josh, 'Mr. Badnews!', acknowledging a figure from different ground, but Sam became assimilated as a 'monster' from whom they fled. He chased them around the climbing structure and crept up on them unnoticed:

Brendan: My mind tells me there's something coming at us. But where is it, and what is it?
Josh: Where is it, and what is it! Let me check the computer screen. Where is it, and what is it, is the question.
Brendan: (blown into a cloud)
Josh: Good question. /Beepy computer noises/ It's the monster! It's that monster that ...!

When David joined Josh and Brendan on the climbing structure, it was to help his friends confront the monster. Josh seemed impressed by David's attitude, making him a third member of the team:

David: Want me to (dig) his eyes? Want me to ( ) in his eyes so he can't see too well?
Josh: We need you on our team.
David: OK. /David begins climbing down the ladder loop, with Josh following/)
Josh: You know what? Don't step in any of those pits!

Gradually the Laser Beasts' ground becomes apparent to the observer, rather as the details of a developing photograph slowly become visible and distinct. Josh is leader of a small team of 'beasts' whose mission takes them through the vast reaches of a challenging and often threatening landscape, during which travels they must combat an unseen and only vaguely defined evil force. This force is manifest in a variety of constantly shifting forms, and outweighs them in its material resources, so that they must rely on their ingenuity and skill to attack and elude it. Josh, as leader, is especially adept at inventing means of escape that have gone unnoticed by the others. Armed with lasers, powered by jet engines, they must keep on the move.

Materials for the Work of Play: 'He wants a sword so he's gonna be a fighter'

The materials for the work of reality-building accomplished in the boys' feverish activity are the array of toys, artifacts, and equipment, and the articulated places of the preschool playground, along with the symbolic resources provided by comics, television, and movies. These resources are consumed (and transformed) in a manner that is conditioned – both constrained and made possible – by the
in institutional setting of the preschool. Playground artifacts and equipment are grist to the game’s productive logic. At one point, for example, the monkey bars became a ‘shark-hold’ and the trampoline a ‘bat-trap’, providing new challenges and opportunities for the Beasts to save one another:

Josh: Uh-oh! [running toward the trampoline] I’ve got one of their spears! [He jumps on the trampoline, as Brendan falls to the ground.]

Brendan: They’ve got me in a shark-hold! [David runs past Josh and Brendan, to the monkey bars, where he too becomes trapped.]

Josh: They’ve got me in a – in a bat trap!

Brendan: I’m going up in the air-lock. This time I’m gonna do it – urgh!

Josh: I’m getting – I’m getting weaker. I can’t even (try on) my – laser... tehah. I managed to shoot it. [Both Josh and Brendan have struggled free. They run toward David.]

David: Don’t get in the water! The water’s filled with (bad).

Brendan: Okay.

Josh: I’m not...

Brendan: [freeing David from his bonds] I’ll fire – teh - - - - there goes one. Ding, ding, ding. [The bonds fall down the monkey bars.]

The array of playground resources is not unstructured before the boys get their hands – and feet – on it. The playground provides an indirect form of adult influence on the children’s play. As the material basis of that play, it is designed and built by adults with pedagogical and developmental intent. The playground embodies crucial distinctions between private and public, work and play, safety and excitement. It provides a common, public space, at least within the confines of the institution and the buildings of the preschool. It is bounded by walls and fences. Outsiders cannot enter without permission; the children can enter and leave only at prescribed times, and once they are in the playground they have entered a ‘rationally and totally organized external and public space’ – as Harvey [1990, p. 270] sees the quintessential geometry of modernity – that has been designed to foster specific developmental outcomes. In their classrooms, children are corrected when they engage in ‘outside time’ behavior. When they are actually outside, a different set of constraints applies to their behavior. Adult understanding of outside time dovetails notions of work, learning, playing, and leisure. Through the conditioning provided by the playground, an adult understanding of the proper forms of play and appropriate developmental ends are constantly operative. The taken-for-granted reality of play is produced within this specialized institution that supports and constrains its production. Laser Beasts fits smoothly within this institution, but other games, such as the play at ‘Big and Bad’ [Packer, 1993], challenge and highlight the normative order of the playground by adopting an oppositional stance.

When a region of the playground becomes part of the Laser Beasts’ ground, the mapping is not a one-to-one symbolic substitution of one independent object for another, but rather a many-to-many transformation. In symbolic or fantasy play, toys stand in for something else. The block is a car, or the baseball bat is a lasergun, but for the block to be a car, the child has to be a driver. The toy is disclosed, freed, and encountered in and by this kind of involvement. These ways of grasping a toy are not isolated acts of symbolism. There is always a prior engagement as a Laser Beast, for instance, that defines involvements within which toys stand in for another entity. The kind of involvement on the child’s part is not simply to play a role, but to adopt a motivated way of being, with new concerns to be played out. The project, then, is not just to drive a car but to be a certain type of person with particular characteristics, such as bravery, risk-taking, energy, and enthusiasm, as the following example illustrates:
Judah: I wanna have a sword.
Boy from another class: Then you got - then you gotta be a fighter.
Josh: Yeah.
Boy from another class: He wants a sword so he's gonna be a fighter.
Josh: Yeah.

This excerpt suggests how character formation in pretend play is essential for the work of world-making, how it amounts to taking a position within this constructed world, and how the connection forged between world and character can shape the child's identity. We also see how the children's play operates within a larger institution - the preschool - which both provides it with resources and applies sanctions and constraints.

**Pretense and Reality: 'But I really am playing the real thing'**

It might be objected that talk of the reality of pretense play is metaphorical - that fantasy is a failure to come to terms with reality; that play is an evasion of the responsibilities and hardships of productive physical and intellectual operations. The contrasting view taken here is that rather than a failure to come to terms with the real world, the reality of play is a coherent production in its own right, produced in the same manner as adult reality. Development is characteristically regarded as the substitution of work for play, of reality for fantasy. Vandenberg [1988] points out that research on play has tended to incorporate unquestioned distinctions between play and work, imagination and reason, and fantasy and reality. Play is considered 'a frivolous diversion from the more important activities related to goal-directed behavior and work'; it is 'a nonproductive activity' [p. 202]. Fantasy play is presumed to vanish as the individual reaches maturity and learns to grasp reality through logic and reason. As Vandenberg [1988] notes, both Freud [1905/1960] and Piaget [1951/1962] believed the growth of reason results in the disappearance of play as an important factor in thought:

In a general way it can be said that the more the child adapts himself to the natural and social world the less he indulges in symbolic distortions and transpositions, because instead of assimilating the external world to the ego he progressively subordinates the ego to reality [Piaget, 1951/1962, p. 145].

[Play] ceases to be a vital function of the mind when the individual is socialised [p. 168].

The problem has been, in part, too much emphasis on the mental life of the individual. Nicolopoulou [1992] suggests that even researchers who 'have moved gradually away from a conception that views play only as an individual psychological process to one that regards it as a social activity ... have not gone far enough in exploring the socio-cultural matrix within which play occurs, as well as the cultural means enacted through play' [p. 24]. Unless this matrix is examined, play will seem all in the head, a process of personal imagination and subjective fantasy. But, as Gadamer [1960/1986] put it:

[Play does not have its being in the consciousness or the attitude of the player, but on the contrary draws the latter into its area and fills him with its spirit. The player experiences the game as a reality that surpasses him ... The structure of a game ... is that of a closed world [p. 98].

Vandenberg [1986] suggests that development should be considered not as the replacement of fantasy by reality considerations, but as the increasing dominance of a single sophisticated and consensual fantasy. Becoming an adult can be seen as the process of becoming rooted in the dominant myths of the culture. To the extent that a single, consensual matrix provides the ground for human activi-
ty, its reality as the external world goes unquestioned, and the collective work of its continual reproduction goes unnoticed.

[Reality, for humans, is a trusted fantasy. To be human, and to live in a meaningful way within a culture, requires that we live in and through a very sophisticated, abstract system that is largely imaginary. To be incapable of fantasy is to be barred from human culture. Thus, in fantasy play, children are displaying their human capacity as myth making beings who create imaginary worlds that structure, energize and give meaning to experience. The myths and fantasies of childhood are not eroded by the onset of logic and reason; rather they are replaced with more sophisticated adult myths about the importance of logic and reason. Ironically, the mythical belief in logic and reason by adults has led to the myth that adults have no myths. This perspective suggests that it is fantasy, not logic, that is the fundamental adaptive attribute in humans (Vandenbarg, 1986, p. 82).

Where Piaget emphasized the cognitive benefits of play and fantasy, thereby giving priority to reality over fantasy, Vandenbarg emphasizes the existential and ontological priority of fantasy:

[The importance of play and fantasy are not found in the indirect stimulation of cognitive skills and problem solving. Rather, play and fantasy are central features of what it means to be human, and problem solving skills are a spin-off of the ability to imagine (Vandenbarg, 1986, p. 83).

As Kane and Furth [1993] note ‘Even the abstracted realities of adaptive intelligence that appear most “objective”, such as logic and physical knowledge, are meaningful only within an overarching social framework’ [p. 200]. In most accounts of development a scientistic realism is presumed in which reason has the power to identify material facts, stripped of any fantasy, about an ordered and controllable universe. With the notion of a foundational and objective rationality and its correlative notion of inevitable progress called into question [Kessen, 1990], it is evident that within such a view ‘a fantasy is lived as a fact’ [Walkerdine, 1988, p. 188]. The ‘natural and social’ world is far from free of symbolic distortions, and in ‘subordinating’ themselves to its demands children must ‘forget the constructed nature of consciousness’ [Walkerdine, 1988, p. 189] and participate in collective forms of repression and wish-fulfillment.

In their play children show an awareness largely lost in adulthood. Piaget [1951/1962] seemed a little puzzled by what he called (quoting Lange and Groos) the ‘deliberate illusion’ of play – ‘make-believe’ rather than ‘belief’ (the ‘natural attitude of the mind,’ especially of egocentric thought). He explained this deliberate illusion as ‘merely the child’s refusal to allow the world of adults or of ordinary reality to interfere with play, so as to enjoy a private reality of his own... symbolic play is direct satisfaction of the ego and has its own kind of belief, which is a subjective reality’ [p. 168]. But this double awareness in play attests to the double character of everyday social life. It is both natural and artificial. It is artificial because it could always be otherwise; it is natural because it defines what natural is taken to be. This double character typically goes unnoticed by those immersed in it. As Bourdieu [1991] points out, an ‘undisputed, pre-reflexive, naive, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field’ [p. 68] is required for adult engagement in the social order. In fact, the world of adults is no more ‘ordinary reality’ than the world of Laser Beasts. Both are intersubjective realities in the sense that they are constructed by active subjects, and they differ only in the degree of naive acceptance by those participating in them. Children have an awareness of the contingent character of their reality that adults forget.

Children are not simply born into the adult order. They assume and rework it with a delight in its construction. To Josh and the
other boys Laser Beasts is neither self-evidently arbitrary nor simply taken as a natural reality. These children make a range of distinctions between the reality of play, quotidian reality, and realities of the past [cf. the 13 distinct reality modes described by Kane and Furth, 1993]. They know that their fantasy is not always ‘the real, real thing in life’ but they also know that it is not totally divorced from reality. Josh found himself debating such distinctions:

Friend: Well, how about if we do the real, real thing in life, and there’s a man called Lafayette, and he steals all these big ships and sells the cargo and gets lots of money.
Josh: Noooo. I think – I know, but I really am playing the real thing – there’s no (guy) weapons. Do you wanna be a buccaneer or do you wanna be a squire or ( )?
Friend: What’s a squire?
Josh: I don’t know. It’s just the name of one of the guys. Or do you wanna be one of the um, guys that fight – that um, fights – which one?
Friend: F – fights. Are you gonna be the one that fights too?
Josh: No, I’m Cap – Captain ( ) but I – I used to be a pirate, that’s why I wear a pirate hat, but I’m not –

Children’s play thus draws our attention to the way that the everyday world of adult life is not simply factual and objective, but is an intersubjective, conventional, and practical accomplishment. It helps us rethink what is required for a child to become an adult. An account of development as adaptation to ‘ordinary reality’ is inadequate. Adults have become skilled in the reproduction and transformation of that reality, and in the production and exchange of its valued elements.

The Goods of the Game: ‘So we’ve got a challenge on’

As the children build and inhabit the ground of Laser Beasts, they come to define the valued goods of their new world and manage how these goods are produced and exchanged. Fighting, for example, amounts to giving up or losing strength, resources, energy and power in exchange for the attempted destruction of evil, the reduction of the bad. This amounts to the production of the good. This struggle – a life and death exchange with the bad – has its costs, as well as its benefits.

As Laser Bat, Josh is accepted as someone who can restore power, energy (‘lives’), and hope. He is a source of power and provides these goods to his teammates in exchange for their loyalty and continued participation, their acceptance of his leadership, and acknowledgment of his position in the team. His ability to provide these goods derives from this position, as well as from his character as a superhuman exceeding the mortal:

Brendan: [collapsing on a pile of blocks] I’ve got two more lives – I’ve got one life left. [He and Josh walk across the sand together.] So we’ve got a challenge on. That monster scared me two times to death.
Josh: Come on.
Brendan: (So) this is my last life. If I don’t (get more) I’ll die.
Josh: [takes Brendan’s hand and leads him to the climbing structure] If we need – If we want you to live – come on. Come on. Okay. In there. In these. In that. [Brendan sits down on the slide.] Don’t mind the little tickle it’s gonna give you. [He presses an imaginary button] Errrr, pssss. Okay, you have six more lives. Come on. Let’s go. [They both slide down.]
Brendan: If it scares me to death, I’ll get, I’ll get – [They begin walking across the playground.]
Josh: Five more lives.
Brendan: No, two.
Josh: No, five. No, five.

Laser Beasts employs three practical distinctions – distinctions between us and them,
good and bad and life and death. As Vanden-berg [1988] suggests, this abstract system structures, energizes, and gives meaning to experience in the boys' play. Our language tends to force dichotomies of fact and value, individual and social, reality and fantasy, but these are foreign to a practical activity like play. In football or baseball, for instance, matters of concern to the players (such as points won and lost) can be matters of fact as well as of value [Packer, 1985b]. In the same way, the practical distinctions of Laser Beasts are played out not as simple evaluative dichotomies, but in a concrete and practical awareness of properties of entities taken to be real. Implicit in the boys' conduct is the presumption that the nameless, unseen 'they' who must be fought and evaded are an evil force, while the 'team' stands for the power of the light.

Josh: They've got me locked to – to two missiles! Bye-bye!
Brendan: And they're sucking my blood, now!

Laser Beasts traffic in the power, bravery, and strength called for in overcoming a panoply of dangers, and in the anxiety, fear, and uncertainty experienced in the face of these dangers. The themes that emerge in the boys' play involve a compensation for their small stature, limited strength, and low status, as well as an acting out of these characteristics. To a great extent Josh's role is one of power and courage, while his teammates enact roles of anxiety and uncertainty, but even Josh is only a small superhero. His frequent call, 'I'm gonna get out of here!', speaks both to the hit-and-run mentality of a small heroic team and to the impulse to flee from uncertain horrors. Typically, the superhero is a being whose resources, although they far exceed those of the ordinary person, are dwarfed by those available to the evil system that must be fought.

The term 'goods' conjoins the factual and the evaluative. The moves of the binary, practical logic operative in Laser Beasts involve production and exchange, gain and loss, of goods that are moral (good/bad) and existential (life/death), between and within two sides (us/them). They (bad) seek to deprive us (good) of life. If the evil periphery (hidden, ambiguous, comprised of traps, holes, water) is the negative polarity, Josh is the positive polarity, the center. Energy flows from him, through his teammates, toward the periphery in the form of laser bursts, firing jets, and the other forms of the boys' challenge. To pursue this electrodynamic metaphor, negative energy flows from the periphery to the center as the motivation for their flight. These binary distinctions are made repeatedly in the negotiated course of play. Exchange of these goods defines the fundamental relationships in Laser Beasts. Talk of the morality of Laser Beasts would be misleading if ethical, epistemological, and ontological aspects are considered as distinct. On the contrary, the basic entities inhabiting the ground of Laser Beasts are shot through with moral evaluation. We can talk of the ethos rather than the morality of the game. There is a shared sense of both what is real and what is good – a characteristic, enduring, and shared understanding of the valued goods of the game, and of the manner of their production and exchange. The term 'ethos' has been used to refer to a culturally transmitted, paradigmatic manner of acting in the world [Geertz, 1983; Bourdieu, 1991; Robbins, 1991]. The original Greek term refers to a custom or character, neutral to the distinction between individual and social. The ethos is knowledge available to the players that is tacit and practical and is imaginatively drawn upon as play unfolds.

The children's understanding of what is good is evident both in the camaraderie among members of the team and in the con-
test that defines the relation between the team and the rest of the world. Josh recruits, empowers, and reassures his teammates. Laser Beasts provides the opportunity for building a caring, nurturing dependence among members of the team. At the same time the team challenges the forces of evil. Debate exists among early childhood educators about the extent of violence in boys' play [Paley, 1984]. The preschool in which the present data were collected forbade, after much debate, the use of any toys or artifacts (such as rakes) as weapons on the playground. How might the boys' talk of 'beasts' and 'lasers' be interpreted? Laser Beasts may seem to express a proclivity to excessive violence, but the game in fact embodies limits to the acceptable use of even pretend weapons. Although Laser Beasts is built around images of violence and weaponry, as well as monsters and even death, the violence is only that necessary for a noble struggle against evil. The use of (pretend) force is acceptable only insofar as it is required to deal with evil. Excessive or gratuitous destruction is discouraged. When Josh invented the initial challenge in the game, as described earlier, he also censured Brendan for responding to it with excessive violence:

Josh: Um, I don't like the look of this place. Looks like a - the Mediterranean to me.
Brendan: I'll blow it up! [Brendan lasers the area.]
Josh: No! [He pushes Brendan's arm down.] Quit that. Sheesh!

Later, when they are no longer Laser Beasts, Josh was prepared to change the game when Brendan became too violent:

[Brendan and Josh run over to the tire swing.]
Brendan: Let's get onto this.
Josh: I spun onto a seat before there was none left.
Brendan: I spotted a - phh, phhh. I shot everybody off. Whoa, Yee-haw.

Josh: I'd rather play Star Wars. I'm Luke. [He gets off the tire swing and runs to the swings. Brendan follows, and they both get on and begin to swing.]

Within the logic of the game, violence is not an end in itself but the response to a world filled with threats and dangers. This analysis does not deny that children's play can be competitive, mean-spirited, and aggressive in ways that break the frame of pretense. In such cases, even so, there is an operative ethos that provides a shared sense of reality in which aggression may be acceptable and even necessary.

Production of Identity: 'I used my head to get out'

Play entails a construction of reality, the weaving of a sociocultural matrix, the production of a world, and the transformation of place and time into a ground upon which the play can proceed. The materials for this productive social activity are the artifacts and places of the preschool playground. Participation in play and habitation of its ground require a shared sense of reality, of what is true and false, what is right and wrong. In other words, in children's play on the kindergarten playground there is a social construction in which a shared reality is produced in and through the collective activity of a small group, supported by the structure of a specific social institution.

The links between this construction and the developmental process are best viewed not as cognitive change but as the social production of persons. Children's playful work in their world-of-the-moment leads them to reshape and reconstruct themselves and one another. This reshaping of identity is evident in the acquisition of the habitual distinctions required for valued conduct on the ground of play.
Gender is one of the primary distinctions around which identity is shaped on the kindergarten playground. Our sociometrics confirm the observation that boys tend to play with boys and girls with girls. At this age, being a boy amounts first of all to not playing with girls, just as being a girl entails not playing with boys. The Laser Beasts ignore girls and, so doing, perpetuate this gender division. The boys locate themselves on one side of the gender division and render the girls around them invisible, while other boys adopt a more confrontational and explicitly sexist attitude toward girls. Within the team, however, distinctions between good and bad, us and them, and life and death provide an ethos of camaraderie, mutual caring, and the forging of masculine identity. Josh is the bold and heroic leader of the team — the source of resources needed to resist evil. Leadership is a matter of having a position of status and power in the game, being accepted and acknowledged by others. This position is evident as a capacity to make meanings count — to introduce and refine elements of the game, even to select its genre. Josh’s centrality is apparent in his thematic direction, in his beneficence. He energizes the ground of play and his fellow players. In exchange for their loyalty and deference, he writes ongoing parts for them into the script. His position is not all his own making, however. Josh weaves a rich tapestry of sorties, challenges, traps, and escapes in which the other members of his team can participate, and he has the imagination to invent unexpected plot twists and daring escapes. But his playmates also reproduce his position. Brendan and David follow Josh’s lead both literally and figuratively. Josh is usually at the front as the team roams the playground. He has leadership both of the game and in the game, but he would have neither if his playmates chose not to follow him.

Like any superhero, Josh always discovers a course of acting in a situation that seems hopeless to the lesser beings who accompany him on these adventures.

Josh: I can only reach my laser! Argh!
Brendan: One almost pierced my heart, but I dodged it. Now it's got me in this trap. Now I'll never get out.
Josh: Yes you will! This is the only hope. Ptew! There, that got you out.

In this exchange Josh may have had 'the only hope', but implicit in his comments is the message that every superhero must convey — that his presence always provides hope; any disaster can be escaped or averted.

There is evidence that this character has an enduring existence outside the ground of play in which it is produced. That Laser Beasts is not just a game becomes evident when mundane reality intrudes unexpectedly and abruptly. For example, when Josh and Brendan lay face down on a platform on the climbing structure, looking down on the activity below (they were 'in jail'), Josh suddenly slid forward off the platform, landing head first in the sand some five feet below:

Josh: [leaping to his feet] There! That's — that's the way to get outta there! That's the way. Hey Brendan! That's the way to get outta there! Whoo! That's the closest thing to — to dead there is. Jeez! [brushing himself off]
Teacher: [Josh calls to a teacher] What?
Josh: You know the way to get out of that jail?
Teacher: How?
Josh: Well, there's a small one — you s — you slide over the edge — you slide over the edge and then I used my head to get out and I fell down like this way, and I didn't get hurt at all!
Teacher: Wow! Good.
Josh: That's the way to get out of that jail. Come on. Ya-oh.
Another reality intruded dramatically here, but Josh held tight to the interpretive framework of Laser Beasts. This framework is substantial enough to allow understanding of what happened and to convey it to others, enabling Josh to maintain his self-understanding as a doer of heroic deeds who shows no fear. In this way, Josh's role in the game defines the identity he assumes outside the game.

An account of such personal transformation can be sketched. Courage is the disposition to take risks, endure physical hardship, confront enemies, to overcome and be brave in the face of fear. Even though playing the game involves acting only as if such things are occurring, real dispositions will be acquired. In fact, it is precisely the ability or willingness to adopt the 'as if' attitude that is required if one is to acquire a disposition that is currently lacking. Behaving bravely in a genuinely frightening situation must not be confused with behaving bravely in a situation that one treats as if it were frightening. In both cases, however, ways of comporting oneself that are essential elements of real courage become familiar. When Josh falls off the climbing structure, we witness the unexpected transition from the second type of situation to the first. This transition, evidently a shock to Josh, is understood in terms provided by the ground of the game. (It is also true that in a very concrete sense Josh gets himself into this genuinely risky situation by extrapolating a line of conduct projected by the playful risks of the game, so the Laser Beasts game has this influence too.) Josh and the other children are shaped by their participation in concerted activities that define valued goods and lines of conduct with corresponding modes of self-understanding - good, bad, brave, scared. The boys' participation in these activities leads to the production of specific dispositions [a body hexus, a habitus, as Bourdieu, 1991, puts it], amounting to the acquisition of virtues [MacIntyre, 1984].

Identity, then, must be understood as taking a stance in the network of relationships that exist among the boys and girls - as a matter of finding one's position in the social landscape. Identity is produced in the work of forging relationships with other children. Since this is practical work, identity is produced on the practical level, not on, or before it enters, the cognitive level. Identity is enacted before it is known. And since this work is social, individual identity is forged in and by the collective, as a collective product. (At least tacit acknowledgment of this fact is granted when researchers conduct sociometric assessments.) Identity is rooted in a characteristic way of being in the group, as well as a way of regarding and dealing with children outside the group. Character in play becomes a basis for enduring identity.

**Conclusions**

In sum, this article offers an interpretation of the role of social play in children's development. Play should be seen as a cultural accomplishment, initiated and managed socially by children to produce an enduring reality, define group membership, and transform identities. Play is a mode of practical activity in

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2 This point is similar to Bourdieu's [1991] when he describes habitus as acquired dispositions that come from participation in a group and its ethos. But I am making use of MacIntyre's [1984] concept of the virtues as capacities acquired through an involvement in practices in pursuit of goods internal to that practice, thus attempting to avoid the aestheticizing of the habitual distinctions central to Bourdieu's account. For Bourdieu, objective analysis reveals no distinction between moral judgments and expressions of taste and preference. MacIntyre [1984] makes the more complex (and still controversial) argument that communities of practice provide a grounding for moral judgments that objectification will not dissolve.
which children construct and transform their world together, renegotiating and redefining reality. When children play a game like Laser Beasts, they construct a ground that provides the foundation for their activity. Unlike the scaffolding adults construct for children (Wood et al., 1976), this ground is a fully functioning social order, containing and embodying productive sources of value, a system for production and exchange of valued goods, and a forward-directed temporal movement in the form of a plot or shared project. It is a practical construction, not a cognitive construction — a semiotic totality that is simultaneously materially instantiated.

As the reality of this ground congeals in their play, the boys’ characters in the game become fleshed-out identities. The ground both enables and constrains the types of relations the children have with one another, as well as the modes of their self-understanding. It provides the terms in which they interpret themselves and the activities into which they project themselves, even when this projection takes them over the edge of the game’s boundaries. In its exclusion of girls, Laser Beasts reproduces the gender division children of this age typically establish. In its camaraderie the game reproduces masculine stereotypes of the heroic leader and his teammates. Laser Beasts is a collective work of reality building in which a specific form of masculine identity is produced, and the social position and attitude of boys in the gender-divided world of the preschool reproduced, all within the resources and constraints provided by the adult-designed playground.

The analytic attempt to articulate the ground of an activity aims at an explanation distinct from that of either empiricist or cognitivist social science. The former seeks law-bound explanations, while the latter seeks to reconstruct cognitive competence. In contrast to both is a phenomenological hermeneutic of practical activity that articulates the structured organization of social events. These events are inherently perspectival or plurivocal, with multiple possibilities for showing themselves, each with the structure of a figure against a background. This ground is not an independent structure, but is the horizon within which the activity moves. As such, it provides the terms in which events are understood, and it is from this ground that events draw their possibilities. The ground of an action or activity is an explanation for that activity, as the phrase the ‘grounds for doing’ something refers to its basis or justification [Packer, 1985b].

The boys described in this article transform the playground into a world of challenge, threat, and danger, in which ingenuity, courage, and heroism are called for — a world where there is a constant need to stay one step ahead of omnipresent evil forces that seek to destroy. The appeal of this world may stem, in part, from the distinction between ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ — a distinction that renders choice and justification of a course of action straightforward. It may stem, too, from the modes of personal and collective identity that the boys’ world elicits and supports — the heroic leader, the loyal sidekick, the close-knit team: us versus them. As Vanden Berg [1988] says of fantasy play:

The children are uncovering the limits and power of public meanings and at the same time, exercising their sense of freedom. This is, in a sense, an excursion into the uncanny, and something is being revealed. Thus, it is thrilling not only to consider one’s future, but to journey into forbidden areas of darkness behind the public masks of conventionality and to become aware of one’s freedom in the process. What children do in their play, adults do in their imagination; each penetrates behind the staid world of public meanings and respectable behavior, and there is a sense of exhilaration at the unmasking, and the freedom from the tyranny of the mask [p. 207].
A world of challenge and threat is a world of excitement and freedom. If children choose on occasion to emphasize a dark side of life that we as adults consider inimical to our image of childhood, in doing so they exercise their power to construe the world as they wish. The safety, comfort, and familiarity of the playground are designed to enable this kind of exploration. These boys have a sense of the kind of adults they must become.

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Packer’s article on young boys, play, and identity constitutes an interesting mix of elements. Typical of such mixes, it is likely to move readers in any of a number of directions. For me, it is toward Gilligan’s [1990] well-known work on young girls passing into adolescence. The spark and confidence typical of girls at age 11 were spent by the time they had reached 16. One wonders, although for somewhat different reasons, how their next few years will affect the boys in Packer’s research. With the transition to preadolescence, the boys will likely not only become more conscious of the dramaturgical requirements that adhere to social roles, but will also develop a more complex social identity than they possessed as kindergartners. Fine’s [1988] analysis of preadolescents documents that such dramaturgical considerations do affect children’s behavior, particularly when they are in groups of their peers. The issues of authenticity, role distance, and sincerity, which are at the base of the dramaturgical perspective, make it imperative that a theory of the self be grounded not in behavior or performance but, rather, in the individual’s relationship to social groups. To make the point as strongly as I can, I would argue that it is impossible for an individual not to develop a social identity through identification with, or membership in, some larger collectivity or public.

From a developmental perspective, the period of adolescence is interesting because, among other things, it is a period during which the individual begins a disengagement from the family of origin and establishes a certain autonomy regarding fundamental life options. Developmentally, adolescents and young adults are ready, indeed eager, to belong to an organization, institution, group, or tradition that is larger, older, and more powerful than they themselves.

To leave one’s family of origin to attend a distant college or to take a job in a new place is a move filled with repercussions for the self. As the young adult enters the public sphere alone, so to speak, without the support – real and symbolic – of friends and kinpeople, he or she may feel existential anxiety or terror, insulation from which Berger and Luckmann [1966] argue is the reason for social institutions in the first place. Social forces and individual needs coalesce to motivate the young adult to develop a sense of self that is less tied to bonds of kith and kin but pulled increasingly within the orbit of the ‘weaker ties’ of professional associations, work organizations, clubs, alumni associations, and fictive publics of all kinds.

Prior to entering grade school, the identity of the young child is almost completely defined by individual interests or situated role identities. With the onset of the school years, however, the individual begins to develop a social identity through identification with – and membership in – larger social groups. The proliferation in
our time of social groups and networks of all manner and purpose creates the intriguing possibility that the social self is created from multiple sources, whose relative importance almost certainly changes over the life course. Packer emphasizes the reality-constructing abilities of the kindergarten children he observes, yet he fails to indicate the vast and important differences that exist between the abilities of adults and children in this regard. These differences become clear when one considers the nature of the social world of these children when they are not at play. Their autonomy is severely constrained—the social space they occupy is limited to a few social roles spread over a limited number of social contexts.

The affiliations of a child, such as school and family, which typically are not chosen by the child, can be contrasted to those of the adult, who has a much greater degree of autonomy in the basic matters of organizational memberships, institutional affiliations, and personal values. Children in North America are notably fond of defining their personal identities, although the material they have to work with is limited largely to their preferences for certain foods, colors, activities, television shows, and so on. The capacity of adults to construct social identities is a much different matter, given their greater resources and opportunities for the type of social encounters out of which a social identity may be fashioned. Children are not completely devoid of capacity for constructing social identities, however. Many children will root as passionately as their parents for a particular professional sports franchise, demonstrating their affiliation by decorating their rooms with photos of favorite players or by wearing clothing items with the chosen team’s insignia. For many individuals, professional and collegiate sports teams are probably the first vehicle for the development of a social identity. Indeed, sports teams are likely to remain the single most important source of social identity for adults in North American culture.

Packer uses the game of Laser Beasts as evidence of children’s inventive capacity to create social reality. While this game is an artful construction on the part of these children, one must also acknowledge that it is not pure invention. The entire scenario of Laser Beasts mimics very closely the many scenarios available to such children in video games such as the Ultima or Kings Quest series, role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons, and movies like Star Wars. Indeed, at one point, one of the children asserts that he would prefer playing Star Wars, rather than Laser Beasts (“I’m Luke [Skywalker]”). Such mimicry has always been part of children’s play; their inventiveness lies in their capacity for transposing the game to available contexts and making all other necessary substitutions and bows to obdurate reality.

Packer’s interest in demonstrating the adult-like, social constructive capacities of children also leads him to express wonder at children’s capacity to reproduce their social hierarchies over time. Social structures such as hierarchies are indeed continually in the process of being reproduced (and transformed) through the acts and actions of individuals organized in social groups. Since playtime is expressly defined, at least by children if not by their caretakers, as a period of noninstitutionalized ‘free’ play, separate from the institutionalized, adult-controlled sphere of the classroom, one may wonder at Packer’s apparent satisfaction over his subjects’ capacity to define and maintain their own social world of play. The phenomenological frame that Packer applies to children’s play may be more of a hindrance than a help. The phenomenological lens may obscure in this instance what most

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1 I am indebted to Christopher Dowd for information on role-playing games.
people readily understand already – that play creates a context in which we can pretend or enact roles that are different from those we enact in other (nonplay) contexts.

This is not to deny or diminish the importance of children's play. Packer's argument, however, rests on making much of events that seem unremarkable or uncontroversial. By way of legitimizing his focus on play, he criticizes, for example, those who consider play to be of lesser significance due to its gradual disappearance with maturation and the growth of reason. It is not difficult to accept Packer's contention that play is important and not a product of irrationality. At the same time, however, it is clear that our reliance on play as a source or context for self-fashioning does indeed lessen with development. This change is due not to the growth of reason but simply the increased complexity of the developing individual's social space. In adulthood, our selves become contextualized in spheres or arenas other than play and games.

Finally, one must comment on the eclectic theoretical envelope in which Packer develops these ideas. He gropes for a framework than can bear the weight of his analysis, picking up bits and pieces of Berger, Shutz, Willis, and others, but none seems quite right for the task. It is surprising that he does not make use of the ideas and research of Lerner [1982] and others in the contextualist or life-span human development school. But the oddest exclusion, given Packer's [1991] own previous work on narrative, is his failure to develop this theme in the context of Laser Beasts. The developing literature on narrative emphasizes that the self is not only a construction but, in effect, a story that one tells, revises, and retells continually.

For adults, time and place are crucial parts of the self-narration [Bruner, 1987; Feldman et al., 1993]. Our narratives link together and make sense of the various contextualized selves of our biography. But, for children, narratives are inherently more limited, given both the brief duration of children's lives and their undeveloped capacity for critical reflection. Consequently, Packer is quite right to focus his analysis on children's play and its relation to the self. It is through imaginative role playing that children acquire the resources for narration (i.e., a character with an acknowledged record of past accomplishments and tendencies). A child may be unable to construct a rich narration of his or her own life, but, as a character like a Laser Beast (or, in other contexts, a Superman or Hopalong Cassidy), such a narrative is not only possible but required.

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