THE PLAYFUL LIBRARY

BUILDING ENVIRONMENTS for LEARNING and CREATIVITY

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ALA Editions
CHICAGO | 2025

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PREFACE

Our journeys with play often end after childhood, even though some researchers believe play is essential to humans no matter their age. When I think about my own play journey, I think of my father. My parents divorced when I was young, and the two weeks I spent with my father each year were always focused on play and fun. In addition to being a businessman, my father played a wicked air guitar and loved to cook, dance, sing, swim, and read. He was an avid golfer, loved to travel, and was known as a top-notch joke-teller. Many who knew him remember his impression of Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*, which included loudly singing the song "Tradition" while twirling around the room and performing a series of high kicks that were impressive for a person of his size and stature.

At work, my dad loved to laugh (especially at himself), was a quick thinker, was not afraid to take risks, and knew how to unpack situations when something was amiss. He was also a person who filled up a room––not only because of his size (he was 6'7" and more than 350 lbs.)––but because of his playful nature. He knew to regularly check the temperature of the room to make sure everyone was engaged, at ease, and having a positive experience, which made him a good leader. He understood the importance of putting his employees first and paying attention to morale. Fortunately for me, and perhaps influenced by my father, my own play journey is still going strong

Me and my dad

Source: Digital drawing of Megan and Robert Alan Lotts created by Megan Lotts on 06/19/2021

well into adulthood. Watching how my father worked and engaged play in his role as a leader has had a profound impact on my work as an academic librarian, which is one of the reasons I chose to write this book.

Now, after spending many hours researching play, I have no doubt that part of my father's success as a self-made businessman who never finished college came from his understanding of play and the importance he placed on play in his work and everyday life. When I visited, I regularly went to work with him, where I was given tasks such as stuffing envelopes for obscenely low wages, and when the work week was done, my dad would take me to the shopping mall and let me go wild. On the way there, we would talk in the car about how I might spend my money. Would I buy something to take back home to my mom or friends? Or maybe I would save some of my hard-earned cash for the future. Now I can see that what I thought was a trip to the mall to spend my hard-earned bucks was really a lesson in financial literacy. But that's how my dad worked, there was always a lesson, even if it was wrapped up in play.

INTRODUCTION
Jumping into Play

I n my first book, *Advancing a Culture of Creativity in Libraries: Programming and Engagement*, I noted that being an artist is not a superpower. Creativity takes time and dedication, and it often takes years to master the skills needed to create. Engaging play is a similar project. At first it can be hard to know where to start, but sometimes just jumping into play and taking a risk can lead us to an innovative solution to a long-term problem. I've worked in libraries now for more than twenty-seven years and counting, and I have worn many hats, including patron, student worker, staff member, and currently library faculty. In all this time, the moments that have involved play have led to some of my most engaged and impactful work connecting with patrons and advancing the mission of libraries.

Play is a state of mind and a means to have fun, explore wild ideas, and get lost in "the flow." It fosters flexibility, creativity, innovation, teamwork, and work efficiency, which are skills needed by organizations dealing with budget cuts and dwindling staff. When incorporating play into your library or organization, it is important to remember that one size does not fit all. Figure out what will work for your communities and make sure to tie your ideas, programs, and services back to your organization's mission and goals.

Throughout this book we will look at what play is and where to find it. We will dive into topics such as makerspaces, teaching, games and gaming, health and wellness, library workplace culture, and connecting communities and celebrating diversity. But also watch for the reflection prompts sprinkled throughout the book that can help adapt an idea for your own library or organization. Even if you are not sure if play is for you, this book can help you think about ways to make changes, advance your organization, and connect, engage, and embrace communities and innovation in new and exciting ways. Play can enhance any activity or learning experience, and it can be anything we want it to be. As you start or continue your play journey, let this book be a primer, a road map, and, hopefully, an inspiration as you engage and learn more about the power of play.

What Is Play?

Before babies learn spoken language, they learn to play. Adults, desperate to connect with the pre-verbal humans in their lives, engage with babies using primal sounds, funny noises, silly gestures, and games like peek-a-boo. Most cultures emphasize learning and communicating through play during childhood. Unfortunately, for most of us, somewhere along the journey to adulthood the fun stops. As we get older, we are expected to "take life seriously." The kind of daily play that characterized our early years starts to seem frivolous to us by the time we are adults. This marginalization of play in Western societies even affects those of us who maintain a lifelong commitment to play. I have spent my whole life playing, but it was not until I was introduced to LEGO Serious Play at a UK creativity conference in 2014 that I began to see how play fit into my professional life. I started to understand and embrace play as a valuable teaching and design tool for libraries.

Try to imagine your adult life without play. No more art, books, music, movies, theater, hikes, sports, dancing, drawing, walking the dog, or working in the garden; in truth, the list is infinite, only limited by how you personally like to play. Although we often discount it as adults, play is key to our survival; it is good for health and wellness and the way we advance problem-solving skills and innovation. Even if you think you don't have time or you just don't think you want to play, it is worth incorporating play into your life to see if you experience any lasting effects that surprise you. Play complements and enhances all the "serious" elements of our lives and our libraries, allowing us to strengthen our organizations, ideas, and selves. If you aren't sure you are ready to jump on the play bandwagon, you can try thinking of play like dressing on the side of a salad—just add as much as you like.

Definition of Play

By its very nature, play is hard to define. You know it when you see it or feel it, and you can make a list of emotions that can occur when playing, but it is almost impossible to say exactly what it is.[1] Play is sometimes an action, sometimes an ephemeral experience. Play can take place alone or in community, it can be quiet or loud, and it often involves learning by doing. Play is a contagious medium for expression that stimulates creativity and problem-solving skills. It belongs in libraries for many reasons, including the fact that the skills play strengthens are also needed for research and scholarly work.[2]

Play can be hard to describe or concretely define in part because it appears to have no purpose, yet many benefits. We play because it is fun. Play may be easy to identify when people are throwing around a ball or taking part in a video or board game, but a clear description of play can often seem elusive. Both a noun and a verb, the word *play* can describe a dramatic performance, a move in a game, engaging in an enjoyable activity, or joking around. Nine pages are devoted to the term in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where it is noted that the word has "often been used as a catchall for virtually every type of behavior that does not seem to serve some immediate, goal directed purpose."[3]

The play scholar Stuart Brown defines play as a state of mind. He describes it as an absorbing, apparently purposeless, activity that provides enjoyment and the suspension of self-consciousness and time. It is also self-motivating; when we play, we want to keep playing or play again.[4] Charalampos Mainemelis and Sarah Ronson define play as "not a limited set of activities but a behavioral orientation to performing any type of activity."[5] In the book *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart describes play as a means of reflection and a way of engaging with others. He observes that it is how we understand what surrounds us and who we are. Sicart notes that "play is the string that ties our memories and friendships together."[6] Lisa Kurt et al. defines play as the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings and asserts that it can be seen as a form of problem-solving.[7] Brian Sutton-Smith, a well-known play scholar whose archives are housed at the Strong National Museum of Play (which I will talk more about later in this book), sees play expressed in the following seven cultural frames: "a form of progress, an exercise in power, a reliance on fate, a claim for identity, a form of frivolity, an issue of the imagination, or a manifestation of personal experience."[8] Play moves between chaos and order in a rhythm that is different for everyone. It

can take the form of appropriation or expression and can empower anyone who engages it. Anthropologist Victor Turner says that play occupies the threshold between reality and unreality.[9] Collective play in particular requires a balancing act of egos, interests, purposes, and intentions. This balancing act can sometimes reveal the "dangerous" sides of play, which we will discuss later in this book.

Anything can feel like play (or work), depending on your intentions, motives, or methods. It is important to note that more people are likely to engage with an activity or event labeled *play* than one labeled *work*. The difference is really that activities considered play are usually focused on learning and the joy of the activity itself, while activities we call *work* are often focused on results and subject to judgment and comparison. You will often find that the intrinsic motivation inherent in play is a more effective way to improve efficiency than encouraging and celebrating hard work. Therefore, if you want to see improvements in efficiency at work, consider intrinsic motivation versus celebrating how much one worked. If an activity is forced, it can no longer be considered play, but it can become play if participants are willing to let go and get into the flow.

Types of Play

There are many ways to play, and people may prefer one type of play or another. For instance, there is *body play*, like jumping into a pile of leaves. *Object play* involves manipulating objects, like solving a Rubik's cube. *Rough-and-tumble play* is often seen in animals and small children. It can be good for helping with emotional regulation, cognitive function, and physical development. *Social play* is playing with others. *Ritual play* might include something like a sporting event, a wedding, a festival, a church service, a coming-of-age event, or other type of ritualized celebration. *Imaginative play* often involves pretending or role playing, such as a young child hosting a tea party for their stuffed animals. *Solo play* means playing alone. In *free play*, you have the freedom to play anything you want. *Constructive play* involves activities that ask you to think with your hands, like dancing, drawing, or painting. Playing fetch with a pet may be called *cross-over play*. There's *parallel play*, which also may be known as peer-to-peer learning, which in my experience is key to advancing learning in any classroom because we tend to learn best from our peers. This list is not exhaustive, and some kinds of play fall into multiple categories, but you can see that there are many ways

to play, and one size does not fit all. For this reason, it is important to figure out what style or styles of play best fit you or your organization.

In social play it is essential that everyone agrees on the rules and knows when and how to transition in and out of play. In a sporting event, like a game of American football, rules and guidelines for stopping and starting play are fairly straightforward. For example, if someone gets hurt, the game is quickly stopped and, if the injury is serious, a team of medics may extract the injured player before the game can continue. Social or cross-over play, like engaging with a child or pet, can be more complicated, especially if the players don't share the same language, culture, or methods of communication. For example, when a baby is playing and they feel pain, they cry, which indicates it is time to stop. An adult often steps in to help. When I am playing tug-of-war with my puppy and he mistakes my arm for the toy, I shriek to indicate pain, hoping to communicate that the biting action is not play. I usually also end the game to demonstrate that a boundary has been crossed. When engaging in play with others, remember to be nice, read the room, and know or be aware of the rules. It can help to remember that spoken language is not the only way to communicate, which is important when one wants to think beyond the box.

REFLECTION PROMPT

Think about the ways in which you personally like to play. Are you someone who prefers to jump into that pile of leaves, or would you rather read a book or play a game? How might you engage your own play preferences at work? Some ideas are hosting a game night, starting a book club, or creating a pop-up makerspace, which we will talk about later in this book.

Why Play?

Considering the benefits of play can help us better understand why it is so important. Play involves critical thinking, evaluation, reflection, and trying something new. It also requires that we know how and when to redirect and change plans. Play encourages us to think, ask questions, and seek answers. Although play appears to have no purpose or obvious benefits, it does have an impact on how we feel, act, and function.[10] As Kurt et al. note, play facilitates five cognitive processes: problem framing, divergent thinking, mental transformation, practice with alternative

solutions, and evaluative ability. They also observe that play allows us to explore different perspectives, create alternative worlds, assume different roles, enact different identities, and function outside of cognitive contexts in which we normally operate.[11] Sutton-Smith writes,

> play is primarily a fortification against the disabilities of life. It transcends life's distress and boredoms and in general allows the individual or the group to substitute their own enjoyable, fun filled theatrics for other representations of reality in a tacit attempt to feel that life is worth living.[12]

And Brown observes, "Play is like oxygen, it is all around us, yet goes unnoticed until it is gone.[13] "When we stop playing," Brown continues, "is when we start dying." He says the opposite of play is not work, it's depression.[14] My mother, who has been a nurse for more than fifty years and takes her health very seriously, would agree that keeping your brain and body engaged and moving is the key to happy and healthy older years.

Play can be transformative, pleasurable, and energizing; it can ease burdens, renew optimism, and open new possibilities, all of which are valuable in dynamic public spaces like libraries. Play also fosters autonomy, allowing us to make our own choices and explore our own preferences. Play cultivates citizenship because humans, animals, and living objects working together as one are resources of knowledge who learn and adapt to and from each other. I recently delivered a keynote presentation about creativity to a crowd of 200 people. My hour-long presentation included roughly six minutes of theory and twenty-four minutes of images on slides that demonstrated creativity in action. For the last thirty minutes, I invited all 200 attendees to join me in a few short and playful active learning exercises outlined in a zine workbook I created. The exercises asked participants to draw their favorite breakfast and create a six-word story about why their organization is great. When I encouraged everyone to share their favorite breakfast drawings with each other, the room broke into audio chaos. There were swells of laughter, exclamations about bad drawing skills, and sounds of delight as participants discovered they shared a favorite breakfast with someone else. In just ninety seconds, audience members were able to create a story they could share and compare with colleagues around them, opening them up to a whole new world of possibilities of how to visualize one's breakfast. I reminded the audience that there is no

one way to draw a favorite breakfast; in this case, there were 200 good ways to complete this ninety-second task. Activities like this show that much can be accomplished in a short amount of time, and they also demonstrate that there are many solutions to any given problem. We are all valuable resources filled with knowledge.

Play can build physical and mental resilience, social intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and intellect, which are all critical to happiness and sustaining relationships.[15] Play helps build trust between people, and it is also good for intellectual dexterity and memory. Play is how we engage with each other; it can be as simple as a smile or sharing a laugh with a stranger on the street. Play can help us get into the zone and find optimal flow, which can be key to learning or meaningfully connecting with others. Play and the ability to adapt is important when thinking about how we work together in organizations like libraries, which are often fast-moving vehicles in which employees often don't know what lies around the next corner. Flexibility and mental and physical resilience are essential for library staff who may encounter library patrons with unexpected needs or complaints about library policies, services, and systems.

Like libraries, play encourages exploration and curiosity. It also enhances learning, because when we are in a playful state of "flow," we learn more and are more likely to be engaged and stay focused on the task at hand, which increases retention. Play can help us move from theory to practice, which is valuable in collaborating and working across disciplines and key to innovating. Play provides a valuable space for people to experiment without fear of judgment or worry about achieving a specific outcome. Play encourages us to reflect, which helps us better understand the choices we make along the journey. Play helps us take risks and understand what we learn, all while allowing us to let down our guard, shed formality, and open ourselves up to a world of possibilities.

Play at Work

As an adult, it can be hard to find time to play, especially when it isn't always valued in the workplace. Brown writes,

> Probably the biggest roadblock to play for adults is the worry that they will look silly, undignified, or dumb if they allow

themselves to truly play. Or they think that it is irresponsible, immature, and childish to give themselves regularly over to play.[16]

Scholarship is now beginning to recognize the importance and potential of play, which may provide a way for some play-skeptics to learn more without immediately jumping in.

In February 2018, I had the opportunity to visit one of Google's headquarters in New York City. While touring the multi-floor space, I found myself in awe; I thought, it really is like it looks in the movies. Around every corner there were aesthetically pleasing spaces to work or engage with colleagues, as well as play opportunities with LEGO, arcade games, ping pong tables, napping pods, art installations, Razor scooters, cooking classes, snack stations, and more. I saw happy employees playing, working, and engaging in ways that seemed organic, not forced. There was a general feeling of high morale, and this was confirmed by my colleague who arranged the tour. Play has a positive effect on the workplace on many levels, perhaps especially for the essential role it plays in the creative process and workplace innovation. For many who work at Google, play is a regular part of the adult work experience. It seems likely that this encouragement to play and explore has enabled this organization to soar. Play helps people break routines and change the way they think about their usual workflows, allowing for experimentation and freeform thought.[17] When employees are encouraged to play at work, they demonstrate increased collaboration, communication, comprehension, critical thinking, creative innovation, and confidence.[18]

When Play Breaks Down

Play is based on rules, and the moment a rule is broken, problems may arise. Play often teeters on the brink of breakdown or disruption. At Rutgers in New Jersey, I teach a semester-long course titled, "Playing to Learn in Higher Education." During one of the class sessions, I introduce the game Celebrity, which is a party game similar to charades, in which teams compete by one person acting out the names on slips of paper one at a time while the rest of the team tries to correctly guess as many "celebrities" as possible before the time runs out.[19] I usually introduce the game and then break the class up into groups to try it out. Although I mingle around to provide support and answer questions,

I generally let the groups work organically. In the end, we come back together for a debrief. Recently, one student exclaimed, "Well, their team won because they cheated!" during the debriefing. The moment cheating was mentioned, the teams involved went wild, shouting out accusatory statements. The other teams in the room sat and watched the drama unfold. It was clear that the system of play had broken down. One group didn't review the rules or discuss how they might deal with a challenge because they were more concerned about completing the task and winning the game. The other teams spent their first five minutes together thinking ahead, determining score keepers and roles, and agreeing on rules to ensure that everyone was on the same page. One student from the group accused of cheating confessed that they did not have very much fun playing this game because they did not know what was going on most of the time and they felt cheated of the opportunity to learn and play a new game. When rules break down, games can become uncomfortable or potentially dangerous. Fortunately, because this was a class on the topic of play, it made for a good learning experience. No one's feelings were deeply hurt, and everyone agreed that next time, both groups would start by discussing the rules to determine expectations so that this kind of breakdown would be less likely to happen again.

Learning from Failure

Sketching has always been an important part of my creative life. When I began using sketching in my work at the Rutgers Art Library, I started thinking about the differences between sketching and drawing. According to the dictionary, drawings are made with pencil, pen, or crayon, while sketching aims to capture the artist's surroundings. A sketch is a rough or unfinished drawing or painting, often made to inform the creation of a subsequent, more finished product. For me, one of the most interesting parts of sketching is how similar it is to the scholarly research process. Both rely on observation, analysis, and storytelling and both contribute to community knowledge. Both sketching and scholarly research are processes that create building blocks for other, more finished projects. A researcher taking notes isn't creating a publishable manuscript; they are gathering and recording information about what they learn. And someone making an urban sketch does not expect it to be a masterpiece. Yet both processes use a curated set of data and observations to tell a story that can turn into something more.

I sketch for a variety of reasons, such as figuring out ideas, taking notes, as a reward for accomplishing a work task, to document something I might use in something I'm making, like a zine, or to pass time or escape the intensity or boredom I might feel on any given day. I also often use sketching to encourage people to reflect on their own ideas, work, or research. One of the most common phrases I hear in sketching activities or workshops is "How am I going to do this when I can't even draw a stick figure?" Some participants feel I'm setting them up for failure. When I hear this, I remind everyone there are no wrong answers when it comes to, for example, drawing your favorite breakfast. I wouldn't ask anyone to create a lifelike replica of their breakfast; perspective drawing can be a difficult skill that some of us never master, no matter how hard we try. When a participant worries that they don't have the skills for sketching we try out a six-line or two-minute drawing exercise instead; this can remove some of the pressure. It is the sketching process, rather than any specific skill set, that can help us focus on how the choices we make influence our finished project. This is why playful processes like sketching can encourage problem solving, reflection, and innovation.

When playing, we learn about ourselves and each other, and we discover how easy and productive learning can be. When we work and play in groups, we are more adaptable, creative, innovative, and fearless. Playing doesn't need to cost a lot of money, and even those who are "play insecure" can find playful activities that work for them. As Brown says, all we need is an intention to "be present, passionate, and adaptable, and don't be afraid to act silly, or look like a fool. Remember life is about learning and failing can be the best life lesson of all."[20]

FIGURE 1.1
Self-portrait

Source: Digital drawing created by Megan Lotts on 08/05/23

Embracing Play

The more you learn about play and its possibilities, the easier it can be to embrace. But like learning a language, play can take time and practice. It is time for libraries and other organizations to embrace play because it fosters exploration and encourages risk-taking while encouraging us not to fear failure.

Embracing and encouraging play can be an easy, low-cost way to help us enhance the health and wellness of our organizations, improve our morale, engage our communities, and advance innovation, which can strengthen our libraries in new and exciting ways.

NOTES

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