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## PROFOUND PLAY: Why changing the world is child's play

Play is often considered something that belongs to the child's world, something we largely outgrow. Yet the miracle of life is not that adults give birth to children, but that children give birth to adults and that they do this through play. This presentation explores nine different types of play, and the transformative power of each of these types of play. It shows how each of these can play a significant role in how we as adults try to create a better world for our children. It challenges an underlying assumption that we can create a more playful world for our children through reason and hard work.

The following is an adaption of material for a new book on creativity

### *Childhood is an apprenticeship for adulthood*

It is a biological fact that the brain of a child is different to the brain of an adult. In fact the human brain is still building itself up till our late teens. This period of 'biological immaturity' is universal. But the meta-story about this period changes dramatically from one era to another, from one culture to another, and even between different classes in society at any given point in time. For example, John Wesley (1703 – 1791), founder of the Methodist Church wrote 'Break the will of your child... [to] bring his will into subjection to yours that it may be afterwards be subject to the will of God'. This was predicated on a meta-story that children are born sinners and that parenting is about redeeming and purifying their soul through discipline, a view of childhood my parents embraced and still in vogue in certain circles. Around the same time as Wesley, Rousseau in his influential book *Emile* wrote in 1762 'Nature wants children to be children before they are men'. Rousseau saw childhood as a period very distinct from adulthood and his thinking gave rise to the Romantics notion that children are born innocent and that childhood is a period of protecting this innocence from the corrupting influences of the adult world.

However, at a general level, the scientific and industrial revolutions dramatically changed our meta-story about the meaning of childhood, because they firstly altered our meta-story about the meaning of adulthood. The scientific revolution made great strides forward in understanding by viewing the universe in machine terms. But there was a downside to this method of viewing the world. We began to see *ourselves* in machine terms. For thousands of years people had defined their identity by their *relationships*; the tribe to which they belonged, their family of origin, and the location where they lived. The first question you would ask a person in order to establish their identity was, 'What tribe do you belong to?' But as a result of the scientific and industrial revolution, people began to define their identity in terms of what they *produced*. The first question to establish a person's identity became, 'What work do you do?' Or decoded, 'As a productive machine, what products do you output?' This change in conception of identity for adults had significant impacts on how adults viewed the identity of children. When identity was tied to a person's relationship to place and people, children were able to share this adult sense of identity. Children were 'little adults growing into big adults' sharing the same

tribe and the same connection to locality as the big adults. But when adult identity became tied to what the adult produced as a productive machine, children were unable to share this new adult identity (well certainly not after child labour laws banned children from the workforce). A new way of conceiving of childhood needed to be found. There are many writers who argue that there was no concept of childhood prior to the scientific and industrial revolutions. Whether this is correct or not is immaterial. What is important is that post the industrial revolution, the concept of childhood carried within it the notion that this is a period which is very distinct and of an entirely different nature to adulthood. Childhood was now conceived as an apprenticeship for adulthood. To be grown up meant to shed our childhood as one sheds clothes that are outgrown. This journey to adulthood is a linear journey. Children work their way through grades at school, learning the skills needed to be a productive machine. Along the way adults tell the children to 'grow up' and 'stop playing around'. And the adults ask the children over and over, 'What do you want to *do* when you grow up?'

### ***The real work in society is done by adults***

This viewing of our identity through the machine-model prism not only changed the way we view childhood, it created an artificial distinction between work and play. The high value we place on work – based in the good old Protestant work ethic -- means that we view the real work in our society as being done by adults. Yet children are perhaps doing the most serious and creative work of anyone. They are in the process of inventing and creating a sophisticated, mature, rational adult – and they are doing this important work through dream, play and fantasy. Everything of value in the adult world was first fashioned in someone's imagination. The distinction between work and play is therefore totally arbitrary. In fact, what is play for one person is work for another and what is work for one person is play for another. For example, washing up may be work for an adult but play for a child. Whether something is work or play lays in the mental attitude we bring to an activity.

Because our culture values 'serious work' over play and sees serious work as belonging to adulthood, we have totally undervalued 'serious play' and therefore downgraded the importance of childhood.

If a society values the work of adults over the play of children, and sees these as separate worlds, then this will manifest itself in the way space is arranged in our cities. Segregated and specialized areas will be created for children's play. Play and the activity of children will not be integrated into adult space and therefore child's play will not intersect with the serious activities of the adult world. Traditionally, the space where children's play and the adult world intersected was the street. But in our culture the street has become the exclusive province of 'productive adults' in machines that improve the adult's efficiency. Instead of the street being the premier play space for children, we have created segregated and specialised play grounds. This segregation of the child's world from the adult world in our urban form is no accident. It is a reflection of our meta-stories about childhood.

Every minute detail of urban design determines whether the creative geniuses in our mind are welcomed or excluded from participation in city life. And our current urban design largely excludes children and hence the child in our head.

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### ***Adulthood is liberation if you had a shitty childhood***

Another reason many of us have abandoned the child in our brain is that some of us don't have many happy memories of our childhood. Like me, you may have been told repeatedly, 'Children are made to be seen but not heard'. You may have had parents who believed children are born inherently evil and need to be disciplined to train that evil out. You may have been victimized emotionally and physically. For a lot of people, adulthood seemed like liberation from the oppressive world of childhood. We were glad to escape the oppressive world of our childhood because we were treated as inferior to the authority figures in the adult world.

But escape was an illusion. That child still lives in the basement of our brain, longing to be accepted for the creative genius they always were, and still are.

### ***Embracing profound play***

One of the dominant meta-stories in our culture is that turning your life into a great work of art or creating a better world, requires *hard work*. But I believe the most potent weapon we have is *profound play*.

Profound play brings together two paradoxical elements: reason and play. It seeks to understand why things are the way they are. It wants to grapple with the culture and mental maps that subconsciously produce particular behaviours and realities – the meta-stories. It is not satisfied with facts and figures about the symptoms. It wants to grapple with the underlying causes. It is not interested in dogma or political rhetoric. It wants to map the complexity, contradictions, and connections. Paradoxically, this intellectual grappling with issues results in an initial sense of powerlessness. The issues are always large and complex. One quickly realizes that they cannot be changed through work or reason. The things we want to change are imbedded in the culture, bound into current reality with a million threads. It quickly becomes obvious that it is impossible for an army of well-meaning people to cut all those threads. Profound play does not try to cut those threads or to change the imbedded reality. Instead it changes the way the society *relates* to that imbedded reality. It changes the rituals surrounding that reality. It takes submerged voices out of the basement and celebrates them. It looks for the gifts hidden below the dark cloak. By befriending the underlying reality, the invisible threads simply melt away.

### ***Reinventing ourselves, whenever we chose***

Through role-play, children invent the rational adult they are yet to become. Children can reinvent themselves a hundred times in a single day. One moment they are a stuntman flying a biplane, the next a doctor, the next a cowgirl riding a bucking bull, the next a kangaroo. Yet there comes a point as emerging adults where we feel compelled to choose a very well defined 'role'. We are allowed more than one role, but we must project a consistent, singular role to each of the social grouping that we are a part of. We begin to live under the illusion that these roles are the real us. Worse still, we begin to judge others by the external roles they have chosen. But we are not our roles. We are still the infinitely creative child we once were, now playing a restricted role invented by that child. Given half a chance, that child in our head would still like to experiment with some new roles.

You can invent a new role for yourself whenever you choose.

### ***Making our life a mature adventure***

There are four elements that distinguish adventure play from other forms of play: experimentation, risk, surprise and outcomes that etch themselves into our memory. An adventure is not an adventure unless it contains some experimentation and risk. Risk is dancing with danger and even death. It is a way of confronting our deepest fears and our eventual mortality and feeling mastery over them. It is paradoxical that those who play with death probably take it more seriously than those who think life is too serious for play.

Adventure play can therefore be deadly serious. Ironically, this dancing with death in play fills the player with a greater passion for life. It is as if cataracts that have been distorting their vision are removed from their eyes. What seemed so necessary and essential in the serious work-a-day world suddenly appears as a trivial game. Confronting death and danger in the game moves you from minor league, to playing in the biggest game of all, the game of life.

In adventure play we are not necessarily looking for a successful outcome. The child who tries to fly by jumping off the roof and ends up in hospital is not disappointed because they failed to fly. In fact the pain and suffering they endure becomes an essential part of what constitutes the adventure. Taking a risk, like my moving to Wodonga, can be viewed as adventure play.

Robert Neale suggests that it is possible for our entire life to become a 'mature adventure' which encompasses our entire existence. Leaping from the outhouse roof to see if you can fly is what counts.

### ***Escaping seriousness***

Escapist play can be detrimental if used as a pain analgesic or means of procrastinating. And yet there is a good form of escapist play – play that is used to restore balance when we take ourselves too seriously. Even in play it is possible to take the game too seriously. In this sense escapist play and freedom play are twins. When seriousness itself becomes our master, absurdity and escapist play subvert the power of the oppressor – seriousness itself.

Escapist play can be a time when the mind becomes a blank slate. In these moments we may stumble on new cracks in reality which turns out to be doorways into worlds not yet dreamed of.

### ***Making change child's play***

The thing about children's play is that for the most part it does not have a predetermined objective. I said earlier that the miracle of life is that the child we once were invented the rational adult we now are. But when kids build a cubby house they do not say to each other, 'Let's build a cubby house so I can see if I want to be an architect or city planner when I grow up'. In fact the exact opposite is true. In play the child is usually captivated by the utterly new, fast and fun, and is unconcerned. This allows their play to unfold in a totally spontaneous fashion. The play is not constrained by past failures or dictated by fears of the future. And yet out of this seemingly directionless activity they create whole new worlds.

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This raises an interesting question: 'Should play ever have an objective?' There are some that argue that play that has an objective ceases to be play and becomes work. I disagree. All play has an objective, even if this is simply to have fun or embark on an adventure. Adventure play often has an objective – by jumping off this roof I want to see if I can fly. In child's play the objectives remain eternally fluid. In a profound way their play becomes the playground where the future is fashioned. Profound play recaptures this quality of being able to bring both the past and the future into the ever-present now. What we adults call work is often an attempt to second-guess the future and to build defences against all possibilities. But this rational approach to the future is highly irrational. We can no more second-guess the future than King Canute could hold back the tide. It is far more rational to reclaim the blind faith we had as children that we have the ability to make up the game as we go. As kids we did not sit in a corner, paralysed by fear, because we didn't know if we were capable of playing. We had an implicit trust that as events unfolded, we would be able to fold them into the game as it emerged. No one had yet put lead shoes on our feet.

It is time to reclaim the child in our head and the creative potential of serious play.

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