This and the next issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* present a summary of the theoretical research on play begun by Daniil Borisovich Elkonin in cooperation with L.S. Vygotsky. Elkonin’s *The Psychology of Play* (Psikhologiiia igry) was first published in Russian in 1978, and has been translated into several languages, including Japanese, German, and Danish. This issue includes a theoretical and historical analysis of the development of play as a cultural phenomenon (chapters 1–2). Chapter 3 is in the following issue, which also includes the appendix, consisting of the notes Vygotsky prepared for his lectures on play in Leningrad. Parts of this book have been published in a previous issue of this journal (vol. 37, no. 6 [November–December 1999]).

Elkonin and Vygotsky established their research group on play in 1931. Their research interests were not limited to the phenomenological aspects of play, but were intertwined with attempts to develop a cultural-historical methodology. The theoretical challenge can be formulated as “to show the place and role of play in the cultural development of the child.” Vygotsky’s participation in the program was brief, but nevertheless he established its theoretical direction. Subsequent cooperative research on theoretical issues continued with A.N. Leontiev and A.V. Zaporozhets, who pressed Elkonin to complete and publish *The Psychology of Play*. There are three unfinished manuscripts of this book in his personal archive from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.
For a Western reader, Elkonin’s approach to play research may seem strange. Quite often our main concerns involve what play is and how to separate it from other types of behavior. Definitions help us to draw limits and frame what to study. In this regard, F.P. Hughes gives an excellent example: “Play has five essential characteristics. It is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, nonliteral, and actively engaged in by participants. Early theories of play emphasized its biological and genetic elements . . . while contemporary theories stress the emotional, intellectual, and social benefits of play” (1998, p. 25). Elkonin takes us back to the roots of a theoretical explanation of play by analyzing psychological theories and ethnographic research materials.

The key to his theoretical thinking can be found in the appendix of his book, which includes Vygotsky’s lesson plans for his lecture on play for a course on the psychology of development of preschoolers. Following the general idea for studying psychological phenomena, play should be analyzed in its fully developed form—pretend role play. Elkonin adopts this idea and defines the object of his research as the “developed form of children’s play activity,” and he traces the historical origins of role play.

In his lecture, Vygotsky outlined the challenges of play research, which certainly influenced Elkonin’s work: “I have to address three issues: (1) to demonstrate that play is not just the predominant moment of child development, but the leading factor; (2) to show how play develops, that is, the developmental significance of the transition from the predominance of the imaginary situation to the predominance of rules; and (3) to show the internal transformations originated by play in the child’s development” (1966, p. 63). In his letter to Elkonin he writes about the joint goal of “creating a new theory of play.”

Elkonin takes this challenge and tries to elaborate his theoretical understanding of play. According to his account, new theoretical ideas in his play theory are the unit of play, the separation of theme and content, a hypothesis about the historical origin of play and periods of childhood, an understanding of play as a compre-
hensive form of orientational activity, actions performed with objects as the source of play, and play as the prerequisite for a conditioned position that is the basis of all intellectual understanding of the world. We may add to this account the function of play in the development of motivation and imagination that was emphasized in Elkonin’s texts.

Elkonin’s account may not reveal the main theoretical focus of his research. His play research is not only a study on individual play and development. His theoretical interests are oriented toward relationships between different levels of development. For example, a central concept of Scandinavian early childhood education is children’s “free play.” Elkonin argues that the picture of play as an independent activity of children is possible because it is quite difficult to see all the forms and channels of adult guidance as they take place in children. Elkonin shows how the origin of children’s play is connected with their changing social status in society at certain historical moments. A child’s motivation and need to play are societal, not biological. Children’s participation in social life is a general explanation for play motivation. In addition, instruments in play have a social nature. They are not the results of children’s spontaneous intellectual development. Play is socially elaborated and guided by offering materials and toys, scripts and rules. We may have an illusion of the spontaneous nature of children’s play at home, where adult influence takes the form of distinct everyday situations.

We may conclude changes in childhood bring changes in concrete forms of play. Elkonin’s work on play preceded television and the expansion of mass media by more than three decades. This partly explains why he emphasizes the family environment and kindergarten as the main sources of play themes and content. Play content is different today, but his claim regarding the centrality of human relations in play is still valid. My own research on changes in shopping play over thirty years demonstrates the change from construction play to moral experimentation with values (e.g., robbing shops) (Hakkarainen, 1999).
The cultural-historical approach to child development is visible in Elkonin’s study on the relationship between play and development. Children’s play is analyzed in units. The total structure is a more essential developmental factor than is the appearance of separate skills in the play process. Elkonin stated: “Any activity, including play, can be divided into separate skills and their sum: perception + memory + thinking + imagination. But when we dissolve play into separate elements, we completely lose its characteristic as children’s activity, a form of life that connects children to the surrounding reality” (1989, p. 316).

Certain features of play, such as substituting real actions with models, schemes, and symbols, are indicators of general psychological development. The ease of substitutions is explained on the basis of an intimate connection to one’s personal sense. But from the point of psychological development, the ease of substitutions is not the main feature of play. The core developmental aspect is the contradiction between the sense of play actions and the concrete operations by which they are carried out. Operations are real but their sense varies depending on plot and other factors. While the sense of play may be preserved, the realization differs.

Role actions and relationships are closely connected to the development of a child’s self-image. The direct connection between the individual subject and the play activity disappears. The play role mediates this relation or even substitutes the real subject. A child playing “bunny” is “me-bunny” carrying out bunny-like actions. Through roles a child identifies with other subjects, but is aware that an ordinary child is playing the role. This is a case of a double subject, which helps the child gradually to find his or her real self.

Play actions distract from the real person and real subject, but paradoxically this makes the child more conscious of his or her possibility to decide on play actions. The child starts to understand himself as the subject of emotional experience (perezhivanie). The relationship between the level of pretend role play (independent
elaboration of roles, level of role performance, etc.) and self-picture (stability, consciousness, etc.) is studied experimentally. These factors seem to be directly related. The systematic development of a pretend role with weak players has visible effects on their play skills and self-picture (Elkonin 1989).

The developmental effects of play described above are still isolated phenomena. The challenge is to explain the more comprehensive and holistic characteristics of development that are connected with play as Vygotsky outlined in his general approach. Elkonin (1999) indicated four broad domains in which the developmental potential of play is essential: (1) needs and motivation; (2) overcoming cognitive egocentrism; (3) internal actions; and (4) volitional features of the child’s actions.

Under the influence of play, essential changes take place in the development of a child’s motivation. At first, an adult and an adult’s actions are models for the child’s action. During the stage of object play, the child wants to act like the adult. The next step in motivational development is based on a new type of relationship with one’s cultural surroundings. The relationship is emotionally colored, thus giving a new sense for playing with objects.

For example, acting with a doll changes from manipulating and carrying out separate actions to taking care of a child (the child is a mother taking care of her child) and the actions express the mother’s relationship with her child. The child in play is emotionally oriented toward adult relationships and sense of acting. Elkonin believes that condensing and shortening play actions is a clear indication that the child has observed human relations and has an emotional experience of their sense. This is why, at first, the child understands only the emotional significance of adult actions for others and thinks that this is the basis of all relations between adults.

But a child’s emotional identification with adults does not change him or her into an adult. The child clearly understands even in adult roles that he is still a small child. The child is emotionally oriented to the sense of adult activity, but realizes his position in
an adult world. This contradiction produces the need to be like adults, which is possible in the imagined situations of pretend play. With respect to the developmental potential of play, a new psychological form of motives is an essential factor. Emotionally colored immediate wishes are transformed to more general conscious intentions.

The development of play and internalized actions go hand in hand. Play actions depend less and less on substituting objects. At first, play actions are detailed and concrete objects are necessary for them. Later, the mere naming of an object can substitute for it; play actions are shortened and take the form of a symbolic gesture that complements talk. Play actions are in the no-man’s-land between external and internal actions when they are carried out as suggestive external actions. While play action is no longer external, it is not yet completely internal either.

Play thus creates a possibility to transform to internal action that is supported by speech. In this sense play creates the zone of proximal development of internal actions. This suggests that play creates connections between phenomena and objects that are otherwise not possible. These may have important effects on learning and problem solving outside the play situation (e.g., reflection). Elkonin believed that play develops, in particular, general mechanisms of thinking.

Play guides children’s activities in a way that is important in the volitional regulation of action. Role play starts with hidden rules and gradually changes to activity governed by open rules. Vygotsky (1966) emphasized that in role play the child constantly has to repress immediate impulses and act according to the role taken. For Vygotsky this was a basic feature of play, which led to the conclusion that play always creates a zone of proximal development. The child’s voluntary acceptance of the model of role behavior and comparison of real actions with it was the core of volition for Elkonin.

Elkonin’s research group carried out empirical play research and revealed new features in the developmental potential of play. But, following Vygotsky, his methodological goal was to study
play using the method of genetic experiments. He understood the
difference between genetic experiments and the experiments they carried out, calling them “etudes” in play research. There
seems to be a tension between theoretical and empirical research in Elkonin’s play theory. The empirical research reported in the book has a unit of analysis not present in the theoretical part. This unit of analysis consists of the imagined situation, role, and rules. In his stage model of general psychological development, play has the status of a leading activity that promotes the child’s preschool development. This unit can be called the “child in society” (Elkonin, 1995a).

The presence of two separate units of analysis can be explained by looking at the time perspective of Soviet play research that Elkonin reports. The first stage of empirical play research started under his leadership at the beginning of the 1930s and the theoretical concept of activity approach was developed in the 1940s. So it is natural that Elkonin uses the activity concept as an explanatory principle in his theoretical work and as the role-centered unit of analysis in earlier empirical research. It remains the challenge of future play research to solve this problem. Elkonin (1995b) added to the difficulty of solving this problem with a demand that play be developed and analyzed as children’s creative activity.

Note

1. The original Russian words smysl and znachenie are difficult to translate into English. The scope and content of “sense making” and “meaning making” are broader in Russian. They are often translated with the terms “personal significance” and “meaning.” But their difference is essential in Russian play theory where “as if” acting is based on “sense making” and not “meaning making.” In order to make this difference we use terms “sense,” “sense-field,” “personal sense,” and “cultural sense,” although they are not exact counterparts of the Russian terms.

References

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