THE COMPENSATORY FUNCTION OF MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY

BY EDWARD S. ROBINSON

The University of Chicago

It is the purpose of this paper to present in outline a view of play which will usefully supplement those theories which are generally entertained. Play is, of course, a phenomenon of extreme complexity and, for that reason, its complete explanation should hardly be looked for in any single statement. The suggestions have been made that the play of children is a chronicle of race activities, that it gives practice or preparation in functions of coming importance, that it furnishes an outlet for surplus energy, and that it is a recreational agency or means of relief from fatigue induced by other occupations.¹ Undoubtedly all of these things are true to some extent, but more important than any of them is the fact that play is essentially a compensatory mechanism having the same origin and impetus as the day-dream or fantasy.²

A compensatory function is especially evident in that type of play which involves the element of conscious shamming or make-believe. While it is possible to demonstrate that other types of play may operate as compensation,³ I shall confine the following discussion to play which is clearly make-believe in character.

The child is driven by many inherited and acquired impulses, some of which are adequately and easily expressed and some of which find no direct outlet. These latter create a situation demanding compensation, and this compensation

¹ For one of the latest discussions of the various theories of play see Reaney, M. J., 'The Psychology of the Organized Group Game,' *Brit. J. of Psychol.*, Monog. Supplement, 1916, IV.

² The compensatory nature of the day-dream or fantasy is clearly brought out by Freud and other writers of the psychoanalytic school.

³ Dr. Reaney, for example, holds that organized group games may have a compensatory function. *Op. cit.*

is as a rule secured through make-believe activities. Most common among such activities are play and fantasy. A child would fight, hunt, and make a home as particular stimuli arouse him. He is seldom in such an environment, however, and he is practically never so organized by inheritance or training that these undertakings can be fully carried out. There are inexhaustible inhibitors around him and within him which check free expression. And so he plays at, or has day-dreams of, fighting, hunting, and home-making. I have no desire at this time to say which of the unsatisfied impulses of childhood are inherited and which acquired; but, however they arise, we find that they are many and urgent, and consequently that every normal child must find compensation for their inhibition.

There are a number of factors which may act as inhibitors of the behavior tendencies of children. These may conveniently be divided into the *extra-organic* and the *intra-organic*, according to whether they are in the nature of environmental interferences or interferences which arise out of the child's own organism.

During his development the child is constantly running into *extra-organic* or environmental facts which are incompatible with the satisfaction of his desires. He may want to hunt. Perhaps the family cat supplies him with a stimulus to make this impulse felt. But this hunting impulse has become a particularized affair. Hunting is shooting, and he can not shoot because he has no gun. Instead of ignoring a stimulus to which he can not react adequately, he points a stick at the cat and shouts 'Boom!' He may then, and perhaps to his sorrow, try to drag in his 'dead' game by the hind legs. But the main and incontestable point is that the child is compensating, by means of his pretensions, for the inadequacies of the situation. He would like only too well to shoot a real gun and drag in game which is really dead, but his environment does not supply the appropriate circumstances. And so he plays.

Among the more important *extra-organic* factors which limit the child's expression are the people around him. Just

as he discovers the splendid interior of his father's watch, someone takes the watch away from him. Just as he discovers the importance of certain corners of the pantry, someone carries him away to another room. Everywhere there are people and they are constantly interfering with his behavior.

As I have intimated, it is not only the lack of a physical world fitting in with every whim which causes the child to play rather than to act in earnest. He has also his *intra-organic* interferences arising out of his own complex little nature. For the pure joy of it he would, at times, like to bring down a stout club upon the head of his playmate—that is, he would like to do this if it were not for the disconcerting facts that he would not like to hear his playmate cry in pain, and that he would not like to feel the blows of his playmate's revenge. And so the two boys will play at fighting. Often, too, a child is hindered from acting as he would because of a realization of the smallness of his body and the slightness of his muscular strength. In such cases we are apt to have a mimicry of feats of strength and daring.

It is evident that there are instances of make-believe play and fantasy which apparently, at least, are not primarily compensatory. A child may straddle his hobby-horse, not because it is the best substitute for a real horse he would ride, but simply because he has been taught to do so by his parents. There is little doubt, however, but that the average child enjoys his playing the more where he perceives its symbolic relationship to a more serious pursuit. The fact that children's play is given much of its specific form by adults, does not, in the last analysis, indicate that it is therefore less compensatory. By custom and tradition we initiate various make-believe performances for children, but something in the nature of childhood must explain why children take to the make-believe with such enthusiasm. When we first teach a child to ride a hobby-horse he may be unaware of any connection between this activity and the actualities of horse-back riding. But as he learns about real horses and real riding, his play will become more and more clearly com-

pensatory in function. In other words, the rise of certain impulses in children is so inevitable that their compensatory expression may be provided for by the customs of the race. In the case of any one child a compensatory activity may be set up before the need for that particular compensation arises, but we may still consider the activity a typical product of child life and its characteristically incomplete adjustment.

Just as in certain individual cases a compensatory make-believe may arise before the need for that particular compensation, so specific habits of play and fantasy may be retained after the apparent need for their compensatory service is past. I know of successful men who find great pleasure in day-dreams of achievements which they would not care to have realized in any tangible fashion. In some of these cases the day-dreams express real desires which are denied direct expression because they run counter to other desires of a more powerful sort. In other cases, however, it is quite possible that day dreams which once had a compensatory function now operate as old habits and are retained because of their own repetition rather than because of any important compensation which they still render.

Play and fantasy are frequently concerned with situations more painful and disagreeable than any we should choose to meet in real life. A natural question arises as to the sense in which such make-believe can be considered compensatory. Children do not want to be in railroad wrecks nor to receive bullet wounds, and yet they enjoy pretending they are in such straits. So it appears on first thought, but, as a matter of fact, children do wish that just such things would happen to them, providing they might happen without pain or other ill consequences. In regard to railroad wrecks, if we could read a child's impulsive nature completely, we should probably find that he wishes he could be in a wreck and, at the same time, hopes he will not. He is in the same predicament as the boy who would like to club his companion and yet would not like to. And like that boy he compensates for his conflict by playing. In other words there are few, if any, situations in life which appeal to us in a purely negative way.

We do not, as a rule, want to suffer great misfortunes; yet there are certain factors, such as affectionate demonstrations on the part of our friends, the joy of being in the public eye, and the like, which give the majority of unfortunate circumstances a considerable amount of positive appeal.

Distinctly unpleasant play and fantasy may also provide for the compensatory expression of negative impulses. There is little reason to believe that fears, for example, do not require expression of some sort as urgently as more positive tendencies. Playing, day-dreaming and the telling of stories involving ghosts and goblins may well serve to express fears which must be inhibited in the world of actuality.

Holding the older view that childhood is a period of happiness and serenity, one could hardly accept an explanation of play in terms of compensation for incomplete or faulty adjustment—in terms of the partial resolution of conflicts between the child and his environment or between contradictory factors within his own character. I believe, however, that there is little need to argue against that older view. Childhood is primarily a period of incomplete adjustment, and we remember it as peaceful because we have forgotten its sorrows and because problems of great consequence to us in childhood mean little to us now. Full of impulses to do actual things, the child is equipped with a physique and surrounded by an environment which are constant obstacles. I do not believe, like some, that it is desirable, if possible, to remove these obstacles and make childhood a comparatively easy and comfortable state. Human life requires, and gets much of its value from, an abundance of nice adjustments which can come only as the result of long and necessarily arduous training. The child comes into the world with an inherited behavior equipment, but at best this equipment is an uncertain affair. Each impulse tends to operate in inappropriate as well as in appropriate situations. Each impulse, if the child is to become prepared for adult life, must be defined, and definition implies inhibition. The child must live through a period of paradoxes before he can become an individual of discrimination. If he were a perfect mechanism

and if educational stimuli were perfectly coördinated, it is possible that he might be trained without being constantly thrown out of adjustment. Then, too, if the life for which society prepares him were more simple in its requirements, he might be spared some maladjustment. But the human organism is not perfect, and, while educational practice improves from time to time, the world rushes forward into new complexities. One who has any faith in the present direction of progress can hardly do other than accept the essentially incomplete adjustment of the young as a necessary product of that progress. The happy fact is that the conflicts of youth can be so adequately compensated for by the play and fantasy mechanisms.

While they are fundamentally natural and necessary phenomena of child life, play and fantasy can result in pathological as well as in normal compensations. And as normal compensations the forms which they take may modify the development of character to a marked degree. For these reasons their exhaustive study, as but different manifestations of a single process, is essential. Indeed it seems to me that few fields may be more profitably explored either by those interested in child life in general or by those interested in some particular child. From this compensation process, studied for what it really is, we may hope to gain some new and useful knowledge about the stresses and strains of human development.

Still, even at the present time, it is possible to point out some of the principles which operate in the compensatory behavior of children.

The distinction between play and fantasy is, of course, a distinction between overt and ideational behavior. Play, in so far as it is pretending, is never without an element of fantasy, but we may arbitrarily confine the application of the latter term to those forms of pretending which are lacking in overt bodily accompaniments. It will then be possible to distinguish between these two types of compensation and to note their interrelations.

Although we cannot be certain of it, play probably pre-

cedes fantasy in the child's life. The latter does appear quite early, however, in some children at least, and before the school age is reached both are clearly present. I remember the interesting evidence for the early rise of fantasy given to me by a little girl of not more than four, who said, placing her two chubby hands before her face, "Let's shut our eyes and play we're at Gran'ma's."

In play and fantasy there are two factors, which may or may not be consciously recognized by the child, determining to a large extent the nature of his pretending activities. In the first place, there is a tendency toward breadth and freedom of expression. The child must express impulses which are often clearly incongruous with his world of actuality, and the greater this incongruity the more lively will be the flights of imagination to which they give rise and the more apt will the child be to engage in private fantasy rather than in overt play. In the second place, the satisfaction which is derived from compensatory behavior depends to some extent upon its being within the limits of the child's own credulity. The impulses which drive the child are aimed at an actual world, and their indirect expression itself must not get too far beyond the realms of that actuality. Thus, we may think of these two main determinants of play and fantasy as (1) the child's natural tendency toward free expression, and (2) his need for a certain credibility in experience.

The tendency toward free expression leads to the establishment of all sorts of fictitious characters and objects within the playground. Toys and playmates which do not fit in with the completer, fancied world may be put aside. I remember that even up to the age of sixteen I frequently judged congeniality in terms of the readiness of others to disregard reality in favor of a world of pretty definite and well defined fancy. I always preferred to *knock grounders* with one particular lad because he coöperated so well in converting the procedure into the pretensions of a *big league* game. The same was true in boxing. Having read and memorized the details of most of the historic ring battles, we repeated many of these almost blow for blow upon the floor

of my mother's laundry. And many were the Harvard-Yale football games in which I engaged with one other actual player, both of us, as often as not, playing on the same side. In cases of this sort, the meaning of ordinary play activity is widened by the liberal use of fantasy.

In the course of an individual's development many impulses arise which can not be expressed to any satisfactory extent in a coöperative fashion. Often a child is afraid of being laughed at for the world he would live in. Under such circumstances there may be a withdrawal from play to pure fantasy with its wider possibilities for pretending. Indeed, one of the signs of coming adulthood is the giving up of overt play and the switching over to compensatory behavior of a more private sort. Adults seldom play in the childhood sense of that term, unless it be in art. In the adult, compensations through pretending are more likely to be worked out in private day-dreams. The fact remains, however, that less compensation of any kind is necessary in the general run of adult lives, so that we may safely assume that fantasy as well as play is more common during childhood.

Along with this tendency toward free expression, we have a tendency to make that expression as realistic as possible. Children are constantly recognizing inconsistencies in their play life and trying to patch them over as best they can. When, as a very small boy, I played with tin soldiers and miniature locomotives, I always felt the inappropriateness of the size of my own body. The device which I hit upon to get around this difficulty I called *Playing You Are Nothing*. Every playfellow who entered into the world of my tiny armies and railroads was introduced to the proposition of suspending all interest in his own body. The running of the trains and the marching of the troops were to be considered as events independent of ourselves. There was one youngster who could not push a locomotive across the floor without playing *he* was the engineer. His fate was obvious. I never invited him to play unless I could get no one else; and, when he did come, it was to be made miserable by my constant insistence that he must play he was nothing. Our dis-

agreement, of course, grew out of the fact that each of us in his own way was striving to give the play a more vivid atmosphere of reality.

Just as overt play often passes over into private fantasy owing to a struggle against the limitations of the actual social and physical world, so private fantasy often passes over into overt play in the interests of greater credibility. As a child I was full of baseball fantasies. Although I played baseball a great deal, these games did not satisfy certain standards set up by reading athletic stories and watching older and more skillful players. But the fantasies, too, often became unsatisfactory on account of their intangibility. As a result I formed the habit of laying out a diamond upon the lawn and there, without ball or playmates, carrying out the overt movements of an heroic baseball performance. Many a time, I pitched nine long innings to baffled athletes who swung immaterial bats at my imaginary curves. Here was fantasy improved and made realistic by the actuality of its muscular accompaniments.

The topics of private fantasy are perhaps even more apt to find increased tangibility by being brought into contact with a real social world. The child knows that his day-dreams are unreal, but the insistence of that fact becomes less troublesome if only he can get some one else to believe or act as though he believes in the reality of those imagined events. Many of the lies of children arise out of such circumstances. A boy longs for a pony and a box of tools. He fancies these things in his possession, and before a great while he somehow feels driven to tell his friends either that he already has the things he desires or that he has been promised them. An acquaintance of mine spent her earliest years on a farm which was more or less out of touch with the livelier affairs of the world. Now it so happened that an older sister in this household was sent to town to finish her education. Upon her return she had much to say of her experiences. These tales thrilled the younger sister and stimulated her to day-dreaming. Soon after this the little girl began her own education at a neighboring country school. As she tells of

it now, almost her first intercourse with her school mates was marked by her own spectacular reports of what *she* had seen and heard while sojourning in the town which really she had never been near.

It is interesting to note here that the literary make-believe of adults contains within it evidence of the tendencies toward free expression and credibility, which I have mentioned as such significant factors in child life. Written fiction, for example, may be thought of as an instrument for free expression and the spoken drama as an instrument for giving human fancies increased tangibility. It is hardly necessary to point out the importance of artistic appreciation and production for the compensatory life of children.

This view of play as a compensatory mechanism does not pretend to refute the more familiar theories which, by the way, were not formulated with special reference to the make-believe. That theory which describes play as a recapitulation phenomenon simply states that the primary impulses expressed in play appear more or less spontaneously at set periods in the child's life, and that the child's activities during successive periods of his life are definitely reminiscent of the typical periods of racial development. Most of us would probably admit that there is a rough similarity between individual and racial development. But the view that play is a compensatory activity demands neither the acceptance nor the rejection of this theory. One need not know nor try to guess the exact origin and analogies of a child's impulses to realize their variety and the conflicts among them which demand the compensatory service of the make-believe.

The theory that play prepares a child for later life, if broadly enough interpreted, fits in quite well with the notion which has been developed here. Many impulses arise during childhood which, while they can not be directly expressed at that time, still demand preservation. A boy may be interested in machinery. If he is permitted or even encouraged in his play and fantasy to concern himself with machines, a very useful interest may be preserved for the time when it can find adequate expression. If it were not for compensatory expression through play and fantasy, it is quite conceivable

that many such early rising interests or impulses would suffer repression and thus be lost as far as useful functioning is concerned.

The theory that play furnishes an outlet for surplus energy is somewhat vague, but as far as it goes it meets with no contradiction from the conception that play is compensatory in function.

Much the same may be said for the recreational theory, which really finds some little support in the type of facts which I have been presenting. A boredom which longs for some impossible or impractical distraction is often indirectly relieved by a compensatory make-believe. The school boy, tired of his lessons but afraid to dash from the class room, may partially satisfy himself with a fantasy of the swimming hole. The worried business man, whose unused muscles would not tolerate exertion, may yearn to play ball and take his yearning out in fantasy.

In conclusion, play, the more private forms of fantasy, much lying and story telling, and the appreciation of stories all serve the same fundamental purpose in human life. They are compensatory mechanisms. They are more typical of children than of adults, because it is in children that the most incongruity exists between different impulses and between impulses and the surrounding world of actuality. The nature of play and the other compensatory mechanisms is determined by the need of imperfectly adjusted organisms to express their impulses as freely as possible without too greatly straining the possibilities of their own belief.

It is essential, if not self-evident, that play should not be thought of as behavior which is usually undesirable or pathological simply because its function is compensatory. Neither should we think that, because play grows out of imperfect adjustment, we should strive for a world in which play is unnecessary. Simpler organisms than ourselves get compensation through play. The ancients in a comparatively simple civilization got compensation through play. And in all likelihood the further humanity advances upon its present path of progress, the more important will be play and its related phenomena, especially for the young of the species.