

Play, enaction and the dialectics of worldmaking.

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Enactivism (Varela et al 1991, Thompson, 2007) articulates several major shifts towards embodied cognition in terms of its biological and experiential roots. In order to prosper, enactivism must move beyond its basis on sensorimotor skills into the problems of higher mental function. To this end, it should provide accounts for transitional activities that deploy novel sense-making capabilities, thus overcoming the paradox of situated action that avoids representationalism by a deep engagement with the environment but apparently constrains cognition to the here-and-now.

We find in human pretend-play an example of how cognition is both tightly coupled to the circumstances and yet capable of producing novel meaning as a result of a dialectic process of value-generation. Play cannot be understood without taking experience seriously since otherwise its lack of obvious purpose renders it mysterious. Play is the controlled, often socially-mediated, experientially-guided creation of norms and strict submission to the emerging rules. Play is not mostly assimilation (Piaget, 1951); it is in fact a breaking of the constraints of self-equilibrating cognition. It does not confront an environment that places demands on an agent. The urge to play pre-exists the game, but becomes definite as an experience only through the game.

It seems impossible to account for play if we resist the active participation of the child in transforming her world, hence its appeal to enactivism. In play, the child detaches meaning (how something is perceived and what it demands) from a situation. Such ‘detachment’ is an embodied activity. It begins by relying on concrete similarities – a doll resembling a person – but soon these similarities are mostly given by the child’s own use of gestures (movements, sounds, etc.) and their recursive effect on perception (Vygotsky, 1966). The resulting experience of ambiguity can be fun; the bringing into presence of the absent, a partial cheating of ‘reality’.

Once objects are imbued with new sense by actions, which in turn demand an interpretation, these objects partially share the meaning of cars, houses and creatures. The child brings forth alienated meanings, and novel experiences, through gestures and then – and here is the equally radical trick – submits to the reality thus created through adaptive equilibration (the absence of which would make play unchallenging and ‘un-realistic’).

The combination of a concrete situation with embodied alienated meaning is the freedom-engendering paradox of play. When the child becomes the regulator of play, the activity takes off as a proper form of life, a skilful manipulation of consciousness through situated action. Over time, play is a self-structuring process governed by the dialectics of expansion and contraction of possibilities. Its freedom lies in the capability that players acquire of creating novel non-arbitrary constraints. The playful body can now steer its sense-making activity and set new rules for itself and others.

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