



Ludic behavior in adulthood: Specificity and psychological functions¹

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Monika Topór-Pamuła^a, Wanda Zagórska^b✉

^a Monika Topór-Pamuła, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8483-0297>,
Faculty of Psychology, Warsaw University, Poland

^b Wanda Zagórska, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2615-9565>,
Institute of Psychology, Faculty of Christian Philosophy, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland

✉ Corresponding author: w.zagorska@uksw.edu.pl

Abstract. Ludic behavior has accompanied humankind throughout history, suggesting that it fulfils an important adaptive function. While children's play has been exhaustively analyzed by numerous researchers, relatively few studies have attempted to systematize knowledge concerning adult ludic behavior. This article seeks to synthesize existing scholarship on the topic. Drawing on a review of the extensive literature, it may be concluded that adult ludic behavior fulfills not only the functions traditionally attributed to children's play—such as supporting cognitive and social development or exerting therapeutic effects—but also acquires distinctive characteristics specific to adulthood. It contributes to identity formation and enhances psychological well-being. Furthermore, it may be associated with creativity and spiritual development, as it fosters a mode of thinking rarely employed in other forms of activity, namely *mythos*-type thinking. **Keywords:** digital activity, ludic behavior in adulthood, *mythos*-type thinking, play, psychological well-being

Introduction

Certain concepts in psychology, although intuitively recognizable, resist precise formal definition. One of them is *ludic behavior*. Etymologically, the word *ludus* originated in ancient Rome, where it denoted all activities undertaken during festivals and holidays—unproductive, not directly associated with work. They stood in opposition to what was official, socially prescribed, and accessible only to elites (Szczęsna, 2002).

In contemporary discourse, the concept of the ludic is understood primarily in cultural terms. According to Huizinga (2022), it signifies creative participation across diverse cultural domains. Zadrożyńska (1992) defines ludicity as a form of extraordinariness that stands in opposition to the realism of everyday life. According to this approach, ludic elements can be found in sports, intellectual

pursuits, engagement in the arts, even in political and religious life. In contemporary analyses of ludic behavior, it is impossible to ignore the technological context. Video games are no longer merely a form of children's entertainment, but one of the key media of contemporary culture, in which adults also satisfy a range of psychological and social needs (Petrowicz, 2016; Sikorska, 2023).

In psychology, the concept of *ludus* has not been adequately conceptualized. Among the sources identified by the authors, only Reber's dictionary (1985, p. 410) provides definition of *ludic*: 'From the Latin *ludere*, meaning *play*. Pertaining to behaviors that are seemingly primary in that essentially all display them yet they have no obvious biological basis. Generally included as ludic activities are exploration, curiosity, intellectual games, humor and the like.'

¹ Article in Polish language: https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/66p_Topo.pdf

The conceptual ambiguity surrounding ludic behavior is partially offset by the existence of several related concepts. For example, in the literature the term *entertainment* is used, denoting spontaneous forms of participation in various fields of culture, during time remaining after the fulfilment of everyday obligations (Grad, 1997).

In English-language literature, the term *leisure* is commonly used. Neulinger (1979, cited in: Dowd, 2010) defines it as activity that brings the individual into a state of psychological tranquility. It arises from a sense of freedom associated with intrinsic motivation and voluntary choice of activity. Iso-Ahola (1974, cited in: Dowd, 2010) adds to these criteria the assumption that *leisure* activities are pursued as ends in themselves (as opposed to an instrumental goal) and its occurrence during free time. It should also strengthen the individual's sense of competence². However, the terms play and game are most frequently used in reference to the ludic sphere. Both concepts have received considerable scholarly attention and have been exhaustively characterized.

1. Characteristics of ludic behavior

A fundamental characteristic of play is the pleasure it provides (Lubbers, Cadwallader, Lin, Clifford, Frazier, 2023). The eminent French sociologist and philosopher, Roger Caillois (1973, 1997), argues that it arises from uncertainty, when individuals themselves do not fully know how their actions will unfold or conclude. Play is undertaken voluntarily under the influence of a strong innate drive (the *play drive*). Huizinga (2022) and Tyszkowa (2022) emphasize the non-instrumental nature play, lack of orientation toward material goals, and Caillois (1997) defines this type of activity as fundamentally unproductive. Admittedly, no new material products are created through it, but individual participants often achieve material gain (as in games of chance, for example).

Another characteristic of play, as claimed by Caillois (1973, 1997), Piaget and Inhelder (2000), or Vygotsky (Wygotski, 2002), a fictional or imagined situation. To describe this subjective world constructed through play, Okoń (1995) used the concept of *secondary reality*. Concentration of attention, intensity of experiences, imaginative transformation of situations foster creative self-transcendence. Consequently, many sources recognize its developmental and educational significance as a defining feature of play. Okoń (1995), Piaget and Inhelder (2000), and Vygotsky (Wygotski, 2002) also strongly emphasize the presence in this type of activity of voluntarily accepted rules and norms. These emerge from the role assumed by the participant. Attention is also drawn to the social conditioning of play (Sutton-Smith, 2000; Dobroczyński, 2005).

Within the broader category of play, games constitute a narrower subgroup. In them, the significance of the activity's outcome itself increases, becoming the dominant objective of the activity. Games are governed by explicit and clearly defined rules. Games are essentially social in character. While play, in the narrow sense, can proceed in solitude, a game requires interaction with others. As a rule, it involves competition, rivalry with opponents or, in games of chance, with fate itself. The sphere of playful illusion is substantially reduced in games. From the "make-believe world", what primarily remains is a particular mental attitude: the awareness of playing (Okoń, 1995). In the case of contemporary video games, especially online ones, both the social element and the significance of the outcome seem particularly developed: players cooperate, compete, communicate in real time, and create lasting, highly cohesive online communities (Sikorska, 2023).

The literature suggests that ludic behavior consists of games, play, and other entertainment. The differences between individual forms lie in the presence or absence of certain established rules. It seems, therefore, that a concentric model of ludic behavior can be adopted. At the center are those activities in which adherence to rules is greatest, namely games.

2 Nevertheless, some scholars oppose defining this type of activity in terms of freedom or intrinsic motivation. They regard such definition as reflecting the limited influence of contemporary Western culture, whereas the behaviors in question have appeared across different cultures and historical periods (Sutton-Smith, 2000).

Further from the center appear other forms of play, in which the role of norms gradually weakens. On the very periphery are spontaneous free-time behaviors not subordinated to strict rules. The entire circle thus constitutes the sphere of ludic behavior.

It seems that a similar classification scheme could also be applied to ludic behavior occurring not in the material world but within digital environments. At the center of the model would then be cooperative and team online games, narrative-driven games and cRPGs with elaborate rule systems, strategy games, and competitive games used in e-sports. They are united by a large number of rules, a clearly defined goals and rules, and the necessity of operating within complex rule systems (Sikorska, 2023). On the periphery of this spectrum would be spontaneous forms of online play: interactions on social media, internet humor, participation in thematic communities, or fan-created content.

2. Forms of ludic behavior in adulthood

The concept of ludic behavior is rarely used in psychology; the concept of play predominates. In seeking the range of referents associated with ludic activity, it is worth examining various classifications of play, because they extend beyond narrow definitions of the phenomenon.

Bühler (1933, cited in: Dziewiątkowska-Kozłowska, 2022), who introduced the concept of functional pleasure into play theory, classifies limb movement: jumping, sliding (functional play); pretending to be other people or enacting fictional situations (fiction play); looking at pictures, observing the activities of others, going to the cinema or theater (receptive play); storytelling, singing, building (constructive play). Although her division refers mainly to children's activity, the types of behavior distinguished above can also be observed in adults. It is also possible to find equivalents of these forms in the digital world. Forms of fiction play are manifested in narrative games and role-playing through the use of avatars, receptive play corresponds to watching streams and fan-created content, while constructive play is reflect-

ed in activities such as *modding*, creating fan art, or building complex structures in *sandbox* games such as Minecraft (Sikorska, 2023).

The concept of play is also systematically conceptualized by Caillois (1997)—the author of a four-part classification based on the participant's dominant mode of engagement in play. Sports and intellectual games, such as chess or checkers, constitute what he terms the category of *agon*, based on competition. Games of chance (roulette, lottery, betting) constitute the *alea* type, when a person adopts a passive attitude toward fate. Activities involving masks, disguises, or role enactment are classified as *mimicry* play. Also all kinds of vicarious participation (identification with a character, which a reader or viewer experiences in the cinema or during sports competitions) constitutes an example of this category, though "degraded, 'diluted'" (Caillois, 1997, p. 105). The occasional idolization of celebrities or public figures also constitutes this form of participation. Finally, the author considers ludic behaviors bringing pleasurable panic, a trance-like state of exhilaration. Activities producing physical vertigo (all kinds of carousels, swings), intoxication, dances, and exhilaration induced by speed he calls *ilinx*-type play. In contemporary popular culture, Dobroczyński (2005) offered valuable reflections on these categories.

Interestingly, the categories defined by Caillois fit very well with the world of contemporary video games: competitive online games exemplify the *agon* model, chance-based games in digital environments—*alea*, numerous RPG or simulation games—*mimicry*, and dynamic action games, producing intense emotional arousal, may correspond to the *ilinx* category.

Also types of activity deliberately designed by educators and intended to develop attention, memory, and enrichment of knowledge are forms of play. They are called educational play. This type of play can also be found in cyberspace and constitutes an important component of systemic educational change. Within contemporary "Education 4.0" and initiatives such as the "Grydaktyka" project of the Ministry of Education and Science from 2022, online games are becoming full-fledged learning environments. Thanks to this, online games function today as part of educational infrastructure, supporting both educational processes and key competencies in digital

culture (Sikorska, 2023). Currently, when the idea of lifelong learning is promoted, this category also includes adult behavior. In professional contexts, adults increasingly acquire knowledge and develop skills through online environments.

The sphere of ludic behavior is finally complemented by Day's taxonomy (2010) based on different mechanisms underlying the initiation and purposes of play. He considers playful activities directed toward novel or complex objects (e.g., solving crosswords or manipulating a Rubik's Cube) and spontaneous activity during periods of boredom (e.g., "jumping" from one television channel to another). Also activities performing a therapeutic function may also possess a ludic character. The exploratory play, oriented toward variety, and cathartic play distinguished in this way occur alongside creative and mimetic play known from earlier classifications.

Day's taxonomy finds natural reflection today in adult behavior on the internet. Jumping between television channels has been replaced by "jumping" between digital content, and manipulation of objects—by interaction with game or application elements. Many forms of contemporary online activity perform a cathartic function: players regulate emotional tension through gameplay, immersion in fiction, or communication with other users (Lubbers et al., 2023; Sikorska, 2023).

The above selected typologies show how diverse forms of behavior are termed ludic. Adult play compared to children's play is characterized by greater complexity. A child needs the simplest rules, the most ordinary objects, to derive pleasure from this type of activity. Children create ludic space themselves and therefore relies mainly on its own imagination. An adult in play usually only temporarily enters an alternative reality, parallel to everyday life. To be able to immerse themselves in it, they need a greater number of props, a more attractive scenario. In this sense, contemporary video games constitute a natural response to adult needs: they offer rich worlds, narratives, roles, tasks, and opportunities for personalization.

Although adulthood is characterized by less free time, there is an expansion of the ludic sphere with new forms of activity not found in children's play.

At each stage of life, a person adapts play to their requirements. Therefore, when new needs appear, it also changes to fulfill them. An adult participates in social life (visits friends), engages in conversation for its own sake, engages in physical recreation and various types of practical activity (e.g., cultivates a garden plot). They engage in intellectual pursuits or various types of hobbies (collecting, amateur artistic activity, tinkering). Shopping for pleasure, communication via mobile phones and the internet has become a common form of leisure activity.

Unfortunately, in adulthood we also find cruel forms of play, whose purpose is to inflict suffering or death on the victim (its varieties include bullfighting, as well as the phenomenon of so-called hazing occurring in the military or gang activity). Similar manifestations of cruel ludicity are also observed in online environments, where forms such as *trolling*, *griefing*, or *flaming* involve deliberately causing harm or suffering to other players and are perceived by their perpetrators as a specific variety of play (Sikorska, 2023).

Currently, therefore, the technological context does not replace traditional forms of play so much as extend them naturally. In cyberspace, analogies to forms of play taking place in the material world can easily be discerned.

3. The significance of ludic behavior in ontogenetic development

As already mentioned, there is a lack of systematized research about the psychological functions of ludic behavior in adulthood. Individual authors often only suggest certain relationships, formulate views that refer only indirectly to play. We therefore attempt to summarize various concepts, find similarities between them, and develop a synthetic interpretation of them, which is so lacking in psychology. Based on available literature, we try to create a model consisting of two levels. The first level concerns the psychological functions of ludic behavior as an extension of its developmental role in early life. The second, more advanced level encompasses the specific effects of ludic behavior on adult development.

To be able to reasonably meaningfully assess the significance of ludic behavior in adulthood, one must first examine children's play from the same angle. Many researchers representing different psychological schools have dealt with this issue. Their multifaceted views on children's play continue to shape contemporary thinking about this phenomenon today.

3.1. Cognitive-developmental approach

Piaget and Inhelder (2000), in their work on cognitive development, recognized play as one of the most important forms of child activity. Initially, cognition is action-based and occurs as a result of object manipulation. Over time, it becomes possible through logical and mathematical operations. It turns out that both forms of cognition are refined through play. Play contributes particularly strongly to the development of higher-order cognition. It fosters the development of the semiotic (symbolic) function in children. The child discovers that a symbol implies the representation of some absent object. Gradually it also begins to perceive the multiplicity of symbolic meanings, which makes it capable of communication by means of signs (i.e., symbolic gesture). Play thus mediates between pre-representation in action and internal representation in thought, promoting the development of speech and higher mental functions.

Play also enables continuous adaptation to the environment. Piaget considered it as a form of assimilative activity, through which new stimuli or objects from the environment are assimilated and incorporated into existing cognitive schemas. In this way, the child expands its mental structures, which allow it to achieve an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the surrounding world (Piaget, Inhelder, 2000).

Piaget's views were developed by Tyszkowa (1988). She believed that play promotes the structuring and restructuring of individual experience. Thanks to this psychomotor activity, the content of experiences gained in the real world can be processed more deeply and on a new cognitive level, and then incorporated in symbolic form into mental structures (this process is mediated by an action-based

symbolic-imaginative code). A developed symbolic system in turn allows for constant transformation of incoming information and restructuring of experience according to the logic of this symbolic system. Thanks to this, a person is able to adapt to changes in the environment.

Cognitive concepts emphasize the developmental function of children's play. It creates an opportunity for the development of operational and cognitive schemas concerning various domains of surrounding reality. These in turn create an operational network that serves as a tool for orienting oneself within the environment (Tyszkowa, 2022). Playful activity facilitates the emergence of higher mental functions, enables the child's passage through successive stages of cognitive development.

In adulthood, ludic behavior no longer plays as central a role, because the adult cognitive system is already largely developed. Nevertheless, this activity still seems to support the learning process. The possibility of learning new things ranks highly among the motivations for adults' engagement in ludic activity. Analysis results confirm that the acquisition of declarative knowledge (facts, information) and procedural knowledge (new skills) occurs faster in playful learning environments than in others. Programs based on active, play-oriented learning, active performance bring very good results, an example of which may be scout organizations, which in playful form teach the use of a compass, navigation skills, etc.

Engaging excursions, exhibitions organized for educational purposes are more conducive to development than passive transmission of information. However, it is important to take into account the variable of novelty and complexity of the educational situation. The best results are obtained in an environment with a moderate level of novelty. This prevents a feeling of boredom while directing participants' attention toward a focused area of interest (Roggenbuck, Loomis, Dagostino, 1991). Ludic activity enriches not only semantic memory but also visual memory. Direct access to certain images (a walk) causes them to be encoded more deeply in memory compared to the situation of experiencing them indirectly, for example, viewing photographs (Hammit, 1987, cited in: Roggenbuck et al., 1991).

Thanks to ludic behavior, a person can not only acquire knowledge but also refine the existing organizational structure of the mind. Various forms of recreation (e.g., categorizing objects according to shared features into categories) stimulate conceptual development. Information acquired during play promotes the expansion, differentiation, and formation of new conceptual categories. This is expressed in the ability to analyze, synthesize, and compare phenomena. It leads to better understanding of processes and their mutual relations. Ludic behavior also contributes to the formation of mental schemas—organized knowledge structures determining the way of interpreting newly acquired information. They influence the effectiveness of their operation, expressed in undistorted perception of the world (Hammit, 1987, cited in: Roggenbuck et al., 1991). Finally, ludic activity can organize metacognition, which determines a person's orientation in a given space and influences perceived competencies in a specific domain. Research has revealed that it promotes the building of mental cognitive maps containing information about the location of elements in a particular environment. The formation of such maps is in turn a necessary condition for effective learning (Roggenbuck et al., 1991).

The cognitive function of ludic behavior can be particularly clearly seen in the video game environment, which engages players in tasks requiring rapid learning, logical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, and analyzing complex systems (Petrowicz, 2016). Digital games require information processing, cognitive flexibility, and manipulating symbolic representations in an interactive environment, which promotes the development of the symbolic function. The player constantly confronts their existing action schemas with new stimuli and challenges, and then modifies them to navigate more effectively in the dynamic digital environment.

The positive effects of ludic behavior most likely result from the cognitive openness experienced by participants. They adopt an active attitude toward their experiences, analyze and organize them. These experiences develop intellectually and stimulate thinking. Sometimes they can even induce a certain trance, rapture. Then mental processes are characterized by clarity, vivid imagery, brilliance, and order (Mączyńska, 2001).

Contemporary video games are particularly conducive to this form of cognitive openness because they require the player to constantly analyze situations and continuously revise their strategies. Additionally, the intensity of experiences, immersion, and high concentration characteristic of the digital environment intensify the effect of cognitive stimulation, thanks to which games become for adults an environment conducive to creative and reflective cognitive activity (Petrowicz, 2016; Sikorska, 2023).

3.2. The sociocultural perspective

The approach examining the historical and social determinants of the human psyche was developed in psychology by Vygotsky (Wygotski, 2002). This new perspective on the human mind also allowed him to create an original theory of play. He defined this form of activity as the imaginative realization of wishes and desires that cannot be fulfilled in reality, understood very broadly, ranging from basic drives to complex interests. The action itself then recedes into the background, while its meaning becomes central. In play, the child acts on the basis of internal motives, independently of immediate perceptual stimuli. A transition thus occurs from direct interaction with the environment to symbolic mental activity. Objects that previously motivated only certain practical actions acquire symbolic meaning for the child. A meaning that society has given them, which the child gradually discovers.

Thanks to this, it can operate with meanings independent of concrete objects though not yet fully detached from concrete action and physical objects. It acquires the ability to incorporate objects into purposeful and goal-directed activity. This occurs on the basis of patterns of using these objects in its social environment. Play thus serves a mediating symbolic function. It teaches regulating one's own behavior and solving problems in goal-oriented situations in a way observed in others.

Vygotsky (Wygotski, 2002) also draws attention to the moral and social development that occurs through play. In a "make-believe" situation, the child establishes its own rules, the observance of which brings greater pleasure than immediate gratification

of impulses. In this way it exercises self-control, so as not to give in to the first desire, and develops moral self-regulation. Play allows the child to gain deeper knowledge of the environment in which it functions. As a result of transforming real experiences within imaginative space, it intuitively identifies with the world. Thanks to this, it acquires so-called social intelligence and gains deep insight into the roles and situations being recreated³.

Mead (1975) emphasizes even more clearly that taking the role of another person promotes the formation of the perspective of the “generalized other.” The child adopts socially recognized norms of conduct representing abstract attitudes toward shared social values. It thus becomes a member of a given society.

Ludic behavior contributes to the development of social perspective-taking also in adulthood. It helps achieve the advanced stages of interpersonal understanding related to the ability to adopt the perspective of a third person and sophisticated socio-symbolic understanding of social interactions (Selman, 1980, cited in: Schaffer, 2006). The significance of ludic behavior in social development results from the distinctive features of playful situations. In adulthood, it requires assuming a wide range of differentiated social roles (also those whose realization is not possible in real life). This is accompanied by heightened sensitivity to and reflection on one’s own experiences. Thanks to this, a person learns to understand an increasingly wide range of human behaviors, recognizing a shared psychological basis underlying them. It is the general model of social group behavior reflected in the personality structure of each individual members.

Contemporary video games based on team cooperation strengthen these processes because they require taking the perspectives of others, predicting the intentions of other players, and functioning in a group structure, often more complex than in everyday life. Players organize themselves into communities such as guilds, clans, or teams, in which specific

roles, hierarchies, and norms governing cooperation are established (Sikorska, 2023). This promotes perspective-taking in social interaction.

Considerations on the ethical aspect of the cathartic-compensatory effect of art also lead to the conclusion that art, engaging us in the affairs of other people, frees individuals from excessive egocentrism and excessive self-absorption. Through this, it helps to look more objectively at one’s own relations with others. It encourages ethical sensitivity, which can cause positive moral development and encourage prosocial behaviors (Dziemidok, 1974). In video games, similar phenomena can be observed in situations that require the player to help others, cooperate, or make responsible decisions within social relations, which constitutes an important element of communication and interaction between players (Sikorska, 2023).

Empirical research results are consistent with theoretical assumptions. Berg, Trost, and Schneider (2001) proved that satisfaction from joint recreational activity influences marital satisfaction and relationship stability. On the other hand, parallel activities, consisting only of spending time together without mutual communication (e.g., watching television), yield fewer benefits. Playful activities create a chance for open communication between spouses. Spending free time together also improves family bonds (Orthner, Mancini, 1991). Playful activity creates opportunities for developing new patterns of interpersonal interaction that normally do not appear. Experiences acquired in such contexts teach flexibility and transfer to everyday life.

Some studies show that ludic activity even contributes to greater racial tolerance and fostering bonds between members of different cultural or national groups (Wankel & Berger, 1991). Research on playing together in digital space shows a similar mechanism. Gałuszka (2017) indicates that video games serve a bonding function within families, promote conversation and improvement of relations, and shared gameplay can become an opportunity for exchanging experiences and building closeness.

3 Similar views are also found among other psychologists. According to Tyszkowa (1988), through autocommunication, children acquire personal competencies important for orienting themselves in their own and others’ experiences. Piaget also emphasized that play supports assimilation to group requirements, resulting in an understanding of the conventional nature of social norms and leading to moral autonomy (Piaget, Inhelder, 2000).

It seems that thanks to participation in various play-oriented social groups, an individual can build a broader social perspective. This creates a chance for better understanding of another person. Of course, not everyone takes advantage of it, and not all forms of ludic activity enable this to an equal degree. It seems that this function is fulfilled primarily by games, also online, which require participation with others. Cruel play, which also appears in digital space, certainly does not promote the development of social perspective (Sikorska, 2023).

3.3. Psychoanalytic perspectives: The cathartic experience

The beginnings of the psychoanalytic view of play are associated with Freud (1976). He claimed that this activity provides an outlet for aggressive drives without exposing the individual to the consequences that impulsive behavior in real situations would bring. In play, one can work through experiences that have made a strong emotional impression on us, this time gaining symbolic control over the situation and discharging unpleasant emotion onto others. The cathartic function of this activity is important. According to Freud, the repetition of playful activities (e.g., punishing teddy bears and dolls) takes on the symbolism of revenge, and the child thus symbolically relieves itself of experienced distress. Playful actions allow the child to understand distressing situations and lead to acceptance of the circumstances that have occurred. Using its power over inanimate objects, the child has the possibility of transforming passivity into activity. Play thus becomes a form of assimilation of unpleasant experiences, a means of mastering difficult reality (Okoń, 1995)⁴.

The cathartic function of children's play then transfers to the ludic behavior of adults. This concerns above all those forms of activity that are related to art. Aristotle recognized the aesthetic and emotional function of tragedy. It arouses in the viewer intense feelings of pity and fear, allowing viewers to achieve

emotional release and achieve inner peace. He referred to this phenomenon as *katharsis* (Nowa Encyklopedia Powszechna PWN, 2004, p. 373).

This type of artistic influence is also called in psychology the cathartic-compensatory effect. It is assumed that it means a form of influence on the recipient that helps them regain psychological balance. Art employs specific combinations of words, sounds, colors, shapes, and compels personal engagement on the part of the recipient. Thanks to this, it satisfies the need for recreation and psychologically active recreation (ludic context of art reception), enriches and complements everyday life (Huizinga, 2022). It allows compensating for the limitations of everyday life through symbolic evocation of the experiences of people from other cultures (Gałuszka and Kowalewicz, 1982). Identifying with a fictional or literary character, we can expand our own experiential world through the experiences of others (Sujak, 1998). Art also creates conditions for the full expression of the individual's personality, release of emotional tension in a way that is safe for society—through emotional expression such as crying or screaming. Providing diverse sensory impressions, from the most harmonious to the most intense, it influences the psychological integration. It helps individuals identify and articulate their own experiences, also very subtle ones, thanks to which they can be subjected to reflection. When one recognizes oneself in a symbolic substitute, it becomes possible to resolve various internal conflicts generated by reality. As a result of *katharsis*, a person becomes inclined toward reflection and overcomes ontological anxieties.

Emotions play an important role in the cathartic experience. Thomson claimed that the mere experience of emotions may itself have therapeutic value (1956, cited in: Mączyńska, 2001). The fact that we experience *quasi*-emotions⁵ grounded in fiction seems not to matter (Currie, 2008). We do not feel real emotions in the sense that we do not believe in their source. Instead of actual belief in events, there is

4 Other psychologists also attributed similar functions to play. Tyszkowa (1988) argued that play provides a field for emotional expression and helps reduce emotional tension. Piaget and Inhelder (2000) claimed that ludic symbolism, which functions in the child as a form of internal speech, serves primarily to resolve emotional conflicts, including unconscious ones.

5 *Quasi*-emotions are very similar to emotions experienced in ordinary life. They differ depending on the content of the beliefs involved: *quasi*-compassion for an orphan is a different emotion from *quasi*-compassion for a widow. Like real emotions, they may also be justified or unjustified.

simulated belief. However, the feelings themselves in both cases may differ primarily in intensity. Therefore, art can be a cathartic experience. Video games can also serve a similar function, providing the possibility of experiencing strong emotions, which Sikorska (2023) terms emotional immersion.

However, it should be remembered that a work of art can also evoke negative emotional responses in the recipient. In the emotional aspect, this concerns fear, humiliation, even hatred; on the ethical level—aggression, contempt for life and other anti-humanistic values, and in the aesthetic—disharmony and ugliness. They promote the formation of a distorted worldview and a distorted perception of reality. Promoting anti-values, art performs an anti-cathartic function.

4. Functions of ludic behavior in adulthood

Ludic behavior serves the fulfilment of human needs and evolves together with them. Therefore, the functions it performs in adulthood are not merely a continuation of its role in the early stages of life. Adults face new developmental tasks that previously either did not emerge at all or appeared only in minimal form. Ludic activity thus acquires new significance. The question then arises: what new role does it play? Our review of various theoretical perspectives suggests that it performs exceptionally important functions.

4.1. A path toward defining and expanding the self

Erikson's theory (1995) supports the claim that play promotes identity formation. Its role is already evident during the first crisis in identity development, when the need to establish basic trust emerges. Through this form of activity, the child attempts to create a simplified image of the world in order to integrate experience and secure a sense of continuity in time and space.

Winnicott (2000) described this first crisis more extensively. He argued that play constitutes a space of interaction between personal, subjective psychic reality and what is perceived objectively. The child seeks to overcome the uncertainty arising from this interaction. To this end, the child introduces objects or phenomena from external reality into the sphere of play and uses them according to a pattern derived from internal reality. The child invests them with meanings and feelings originating in fantasy⁶. When the child becomes capable of playing in “potential space,” they experience a sense of “magical control” and omnipotence. Intrapsychic processes are thus linked with control over actual reality. This makes possible the proper internalization of the surrounding world, based on the objective perception of individual objects. Play helps the child develop trust in both the self and others.

At subsequent stages of life, ludic behavior also enables the individual to resolve emerging crises of psychosocial development. Each time, such behavior evokes a sense of control over the situation, which supports emotional regeneration undermined after the strain of social interactions (Erikson, 2000). Every conflict faced by the individual is first worked through in the imaginative sphere. The sphere of play thus becomes a kind of fulcrum through which the person rises to increasingly higher stages of development.

Play reaches a particular culmination of significance during adolescence, when the adolescent faces the task of forming the core of their identity. They develop a sense of uniqueness and separateness from others. Accordingly, they must create a system of self-knowledge, based on comparison, and develop a concept of the self from information that is especially meaningful and self-defining (Erikson, 1995). They try out various social roles in order to find their place in society. They integrate the past with the present and with a concept of the future, and on this basis choose among personally significant alternatives and lifelong commitments.

6 Throughout this process, the child's mother plays an important role. She should oscillate between reflecting what the child is capable of discovering (a representation of the child's internal world) and remaining herself, that is, something external to the child) (Winnicott, 2000).

Ludic behavior plays a fundamental role in this process. It helps the individual form the most mature form of identity, referred to as a *freely organizing wholeness*. This is expressed through the principle of “peaceful coexistence” between what constitutes the essence of the Self and what is external to it (Erikson, 1995). A stable value system and a clear sense of integrity do not exclude openness to novelty or creative adaptation to changing conditions.

The same themes can be observed throughout a person’s play across the life span. Play therefore ensures continuity of existence, which is necessary for the formation of a coherent identity. Within the sphere of play, the individual’s most important experiences are integrated, and the effects of previous conflicts become concentrated. It is here that one can discern the history of one’s own development. Play enables self-knowledge and provides a “point of reflection” for developing a further concept of the self.

The ludic sphere also creates an opportunity to try out various roles that a person wishes to assume. It enables the selection of situations that help express and define the self as a distinct individual. Play allows for experimentation without negative consequences. It supports the selection of the most fitting role, which may later result in a sense of self-satisfaction. In video games, this phenomenon takes the form of choosing an avatar, a team role, or a mode of participating in the game world. This makes it possible to test different versions of the self and observe their consequences for social functioning (Sikorska, 2023).

Research by Haggard and Williams (1991) showed that a specific set of participant characteristics becomes associated with ludic behavior. For example, a chess player is perceived as intelligent, capable of strategic thinking, and skilled in problem-solving. By undertaking a given form of activity, we automatically attribute to ourselves the qualities symbolized by that activity. In this way, we test whether we are as we imagine ourselves to be.

The individual also tries out new roles by testing reality not directly on the self, but through an external object. Benson’s concept of aesthetic absorption (1993) and Morin’s theory of the identification-projection complex (1975) explain how a person not only enters but also participates in

a secondary reality created by the media. The need for active participation is here replaced by emotional participation. The individual assumes the personality of the character and, for a brief moment, becoming the character.

Role experimentation takes place within the version of reality that the individual learns in their own community. In this way, the individual simultaneously adapts to the conditions of culture. At this stage, they undertake commitments and ideals that situate them within the broader social structure. Even in video game player communities, clearly defined norms of cooperation and rules of communication operate, while destructive behavior is subject to sanctions such as blocking or reporting. These mechanisms regulate community life and help maintain specific standards of action in digital culture (Petrowicz, 2016; Sikorska, 2023). In this way, ludic behavior can transmit universal human values and perform an educational function. This is evidenced by its role in traditional communities (Gałdowa, 2000). In such communities ludic behavior served certain initiatory scenarios through which the individual became a member of the group. The individual learned to recognize themselves in the mythical pattern of the tribal hero, thereby discovering the sacredness of the world and human beings.

It seems that the role of ludic behavior in identity formation does not end with the conclusion of the psychosocial moratorium. At every stage of life, it raises self-esteem and strengthens the sense of coherence of the Self. Moreover, it enables continuous updating of the ego. The courage to cross the boundaries established around one’s own belief system, developed through ludic activity, transfers to various “serious” areas of existence. Play gives rise to the desire to “renew oneself” under the influence of other people, or more broadly other objects, to integrate them with one’s own Self, and to support continuous personal development (Erikson, 1995). A true sense of identity is, in fact, nothing other than going beyond the roles imposed on us and maintaining a constant readiness to play.

Unfortunately, contemporary ludic behavior is often distorted. One possible cause is the disappearance of intergenerational interaction (Erikson, 1995).

Adults no longer assume the role of initiatory guides and do not accompany young people in their “play,” which therefore lacks grounding in tradition. As a result, young people engage in ludic behavior aimed at creating their own vision of reality. In this way, they create a culture that challenges the existing order and produces its own type of hero, one that stands in opposition to the older generation (Galdowa, 2000). Ludic behavior may take distorted pseudo-initiatory forms, such as rock culture or gang activity. A lack of perceived control and destructive effects leading to the internal disintegration of the individual result mainly of *ilinx*-type play and so-called cruel play. By cutting themselves off from the adult world and from ordinary life, young people seek to mark their separateness. Unconsciously, however, they fall into yet another pattern. Their pose of freedom and independence is, in fact, another rigid role. It prevents the continuous updating and development of mature identity. It is also worth noting that the lack of intergenerational guidance increasingly applies to the digital world, where young people spend time without adult support, making it more difficult to transmit models and values (Gałuszka, 2017).

4.2. Enhancing life satisfaction and psychological well-being

Ludic behavior seems to enable a person to experience a state of *optimal functioning* — so-called *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (2022) used this term to describe a state of extraordinary satisfaction. It is obtained through deep concentration on the performed activity and maintaining a state of psychological order. The individual is able to direct their attention voluntarily so that task-irrelevant information does not distract them (also problems of everyday life). This generates a sense of efficacy in achieving one’s goals. People then feel strong, overcome personal insecurities and emotional problems.

Conditions for experiencing this can be created by setting appropriately challenging tasks—tasks optimally matched to one’s level of skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 2022). They must enable continual extension of one’s abilities, so that a feeling of boredom does not arise. Such a state can be produced by various

team games, art, various types of hobbies, as well as cognitively engaging forms of entertainment, that is, a wide range of activities belonging to the ludic sphere. They often possess rules that facilitate focused attention in a satisfying way. Rituals that separate individuals from everyday life evoke a sense of transfer to another reality, which motivates individuals to exert effort and produces altered states of consciousness. However, to what extent we utilize these specific properties of ludic behavior depends on us, on our ability to set goals, engage fully in the activity.

Computer games are a particularly conducive environment for experiencing *flow*. This is because they require active engagement on the part of the player, are based on clear goals, provide immediate feedback, and dynamically adjust the level of difficulty to the player’s abilities. Additionally, the audiovisual quality of the game environment and the immersive nature of the game environment favor this (Sikorska, 2023).

The experienced satisfaction intensifies the experience of life, brings peace and happiness. A person derives joy from life and from their achievements. Anxiety diminishes, sense of self-worth increases. It becomes easier to cope with problems. When adversities of fate take away strength, engagement in seemingly trivial activities reinforces the sense of personal control.

The foregoing discussion suggests that ludic behavior can become a source of psychological well-being. Its components are the predominance of positive affect over negative affect and life satisfaction, understood as achievement of personally valued goals (Mączyńska, 2001). This hypothesis has been tested in many empirical studies. They revealed that engagement in ludic activity is associated with positive emotional states (Hull, Michael, 1995; Lubbers et al., 2023). This results from the fact that it reduces stress levels. As a result of recreational activities, concentration improves, while anxiety and fatigue are reduced. Players declare that video games enable them to temporarily disconnect from the pressure of everyday life and enter a mode of emotional recovery (Sikorska, 2023). Playing video games together can also strengthen family bonds and promote positive emotions, which improves the quality of relationships (Gałuszka, 2017). It even seems that some forms

of ludic activity (in this case physical exercise was involved) contribute to improvements in individuals suffering from depression (Greist, 1987, cited in: Wankel, Berger, 1991).

Positive mood has significant consequences. It enhances the quality of task performance, willingness to undertake more difficult tasks associated with delayed gratification. In addition, it strengthens the sense of self-worth and agency and increases the ability to cope with difficult life situations (Lubbers et al., 2023). The effect of these processes is an increase in life satisfaction.

Not every form of ludic behavior fulfills such functions. Many forms of entertainment provide access to information that does not require cognitive effort. The lowest level of concentration, and thus minimal cognitive engagement, occurs while watching television (although at the same time it is the most popular form of spending free time). Moreover, this way of spending free time may induce physical passivity and depressive moods (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991).

5. One step further: toward a deeper reflection

There are also studies in which the functions of ludic behavior in adulthood are analyzed at deeper levels. Although not all the opinions cited below have been confirmed in research, they are worthy of attention.

5.1. Development of creativity and spirituality

According to the representative of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow (2004), ludic behavior can lead to so-called *peak experiences*. Their simplest form is absorption in a film, a book, or a particular activity. These experiences foster a new mode of cognition, called B-cognition. The subject “loses” their ego, the observing self and the experiencing self become unified. Self-forgetfulness allows discovering the deepest core of the self. It emerges as a result of integrating primary, suppressed drives with conscious goals. The individual no longer expends energy defending themselves against their

own impulses. They become strong, brave, experience a sense of confidence in the legitimacy of their actions. Perception devoid of a priori expectations, skepticism, preconceived schemas regarding what is considered correct, regains its “freshness.” A person experiences “secondary naivety,” spontaneously opens to novelty. They free themselves from dependence on the environment. They cease to perform socially imposed roles and become authentically themselves. Thanks to this, full expression of individuality and creative action occur.

The thesis that ludic behavior promotes the development of creative abilities was already formulated by psychologists dealing with children’s play. According to some of them, the development of creative potential constitutes a defining feature of play. It expands imagination, constitutes a form of self-expansion. As Vygotsky (Wygotzki, 2002) emphasized, combining experiences into new configurations, symbolic recreation of experiences, using substitute objects compels the creation of one’s own symbolic world of fiction. This develops the child’s creative potential.

This potential is most fully utilized in adulthood. It seems that ludic behavior serves a disinhibiting function in relation to it. They involve a return to modes of thinking different from those employed in everyday activity. Tyszkowa (1988) already drew attention to this phenomenon. It is related to the polysymbolism of play, which, promoting the use of various symbols, stimulates diverse forms of mental activity. Similarly, art, generating intense aesthetic engagement, requires associating images or facts with each other. The creative attitude liberated in this way can also manifest in other fields (see e.g., Gafuszka and Kowalewicz, 1982). Contemporary video games have become a special field of creative expression—players not only interact with ready-made worlds but also create fan content such as mods, *gameplay videos*, or *fanfiction*, thus co-creating the cultural environment of the game (Petrowicz, 2016; Sikorska, 2023).

Another consequence of peak experience, to which Maslow (2004) drew attention, is full focus on the current situation. This enables viewing an object without the necessity of abstracting and comparing.

One adopts an aesthetic attitude toward it, which leads to understanding its uniqueness and perfection. This leads to the conclusion that Being itself is ultimately good, only sometimes a person cannot perceive this. At higher levels of maturity, many dichotomies are removed. This results in full acceptance of reality, thanks to which the enduring problem of good and evil can be reconciled. A person begins to feel that good, beauty, and truth exist, and through this can appreciate the value of life⁷. The emotional reaction to this type of experience is fear caused by bewilderment and surrender to the experience as something that surpasses us. Feelings of gratitude and awe emerge. They can be expressed through prayer, adoration, and other forms of mystical expression.

Thus Maslow postulates that ludic behavior develops spirituality and even religiosity. This hypothesis is difficult to verify. It seems probable insofar as ludic behavior in traditional communities referred directly to the sphere of *sacred* (Eliade, 1994, 2022). Certain justifications for this thesis can also be sought in the results of research conducted for the purpose of standardizing Thalbourne's Transliminality Scale.

This is a tool measuring the individual's ability to cross the boundary between conscious experience and unconscious impulses. Based on conducted research, it was found that this ability constitutes the basis for, among others, magical thinking, absorption (susceptibility to attentional absorption by incidental stimuli), and proneness to fantasize, that is, certain processes engaged during ludic activity. On the other hand, what is very important in the context of the dependencies discussed here, it leads to mystical experience. Shared underlying mechanisms of religiosity and ludic activity support the intuitive hypothesis about a positive relationship between these phenomena⁸.

Generally, these are issues considered only speculatively, not confirmed in empirical research. Inferring a relationship of ludic behavior with the development of religiosity would be too far-reaching a conclu-

sion. More justified is the thesis linking this type of activity with the development of spirituality—but spirituality understood in a reductionist sense as, for example, immaterial and irrational elements of human consciousness forcing the individual to search for intangible elements of reality on which the visible world and human life are based (James, 2023).

Godbey (1991, cited in: McDonald, Schreier, 1991) claims that ludic behavior can influence the development of spirituality because it is unrestrained by the limitations of everyday life, non-rational and meaning-laden. A person opens their mind to other experiences, experiences both the self and reality more deeply. They can perceive the complexity of the world, which encourages them to search for deeper meaning. Researchers suggest that the spheres of ludic and spiritual activity are based on similar processes and states of consciousness (McDonald, Schreier, 1991). Contemplation, participation in a certain ritual, the use of symbols and imagination can lead in both cases to a sense of immortality, mystery, "out-of-body experiences"⁹.

The increase in spirituality may be caused by the very environment in which ludic activity takes place. If it occurs in a certain religiously sanctified space (such as wilderness landscapes or natural phenomena evoking awe and fear), it can cause an increase in religious consciousness. Later, when given ludic behaviors also occur in other conditions, they each time evoke spiritual connotations.

From Maslow's (2004) considerations on creativity and spirituality also emerges the suggestion that ludic activity promotes self-actualization. He understands by this the full realization of an individual's talents and potential leading to the discovery of one's own Self. Csikszentmihalyi (1991) claims that this is indeed the case. Those forms of ludic behavior that require deep, sustained, and sustained and goal-oriented engagement, creates the possibility of transcending previous experiences. Self-knowledge plays a role in this process. When we grant ourselves the right to

7 It seems that Maslow attributes to peak experiences functions analogous to *katharsis*, encompassing ethical, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions.

8 Youth religious camps also frequently combine spiritual development with ludic activity.

9 It seems that such states are particularly likely to occur in contact with art, which provides extraordinary aesthetic experiences. The occurrence of such states has also been observed among individuals engaged in sports (McDonald & Schreier, 1991).

make mistakes, we undertake ever new challenges. Then we can learn the most about ourselves. As a result, the process of individuation progresses while simultaneously integrating with people and ideas that transcend the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 2022).

5.2. A way to enrich the structures of formal thinking

Combining psychological, anthropological, philosophical, and cultural studies perspectives, adult ludic behavior can be understood as a contemporary form of *quasi*-mythical behavior (Zagórska, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2020). Such behavior develops *mythos*-type thinking. This mode of thinking is based on subjective, emotionally colored representations. It is non-conceptual and rooted in personal experience. It encompasses what is intuitive and is expressed through metaphors and fantasies. According to Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory or Labouvie-Vief's theory of postformal thinking (2015), it coexists in the human mind with *logos*-type thinking (cited in: Kolańczyk, 1999; Zagórska, 2004, 2020). This latter modality is based on purely rational concepts, employs philosophical discourse, and operates with analytical precision. *Logos* leads to an objectifying relation to the world, an I-It relation, whereas *mythos* assumes direct participation in the world, an I-Thou dialogue.

Optimal functioning is achieved through harmonious cooperation between these two systems. In traditional communities, this was supported by the domain of *mythos*, filled with living myth¹⁰ and ritual performances, such as Greek Dionysian choruses, belonging to the sphere of *sacrum*. Contemporary culture, by contrast, mainly supports the development of *logos*-type thinking, while devaluing the *mythos* system based on poetry, faith, and experience. Nevertheless, human beings still need to use this modality. In childhood, this need is satisfied through play, which transports the child into an imaginative space referred to as *secondary reality* (Okoń, 1995). An adult guided by the "*mythos* imperative" likewise

needs a transreal reality in which they can transcend the limitations imposed by everyday life and develop a modality of thinking different from that ordinarily used. This need is served by the worlds created by the media of symbolic culture: film, theater, music, literature, painting, and, today, video games as well. The psychological crossing of the distance between the real and the unreal—a phenomenon that may be called *symbolic transfer into secondary reality*—becomes possible precisely through ludic behavior (Zagórska, 2004). Participation in culturally created reality satisfies the deepest, and usually unconscious, needs of the human psyche.

First, it is associated with escape from gray everyday life and ordinary existential toil, the "terror of Time and History." In this respect, ludic behavior performs an escapist and compensatory function, as it makes it possible to compensate for the limitations of real life (Zagórska, 2004).

Second, ludic activity creates the possibility of presence in Great Time, which offers intense experiences necessary for maintaining psychological balance and is connected with the experience of *katharsis*. The individual can attain a new existential experience: not merely being present in a culturally created world, but living within in.

Ludic activity is also a manifestation of the eternal "longing for Paradise," that is, for an ideal world as it was at the beginning: beautiful, harmonious, and safe. *Quasi*-mythical behavior enables transfer into such a desired reality, offering relaxation, entertainment, and contact with beauty (Zagórska, 2004, 2008).

Because the created reality is external to the individual, the person can find the self in what lies beyond the self and yet is somehow similar to it. This is connected with the need for reference to a paradigm. Universal patterns allow individuals to discover their situation and place in the world and, and through this, to free themselves from loneliness. By directing the individual toward clearly defined values, culturally created reality may therefore perform a modeling and personality-forming function.

¹⁰ Myth was understood as sacred history—a narrative describing events that took place in the time of "beginnings." It provided models of behavior and endowed human existence with meaning and value, while also ensuring, among other things, a sense of security.

Through participation in a reality that transcends the self, the individual can, in a substitutive, affective-imaginative way, transcend the human condition. The symbolism, expressiveness, and mimetic character of *mythos* satisfy the need to be someone else, someone more, even an *impossible self*, that is, as self that cannot be realized in actual reality (Zagórska, 2004). Thus, ludic behavior performs transgressive and developmental functions¹¹, although in a diminished form. Through its saturation with ritual elements, it also performs a *quasi*-initiatory role, increasing the sense of adulthood and self-worth.

An additional function of ludic behavior is often “integration with the whole,” that is, identification with a group of similar others. Shared participation in another world and coming to know it through experience satisfy the need for fellowship and spontaneous bonds. The affiliative function seems particularly important in the period of young adulthood (Zagórska, 2004).

The specific functions of *quasi*-mythical behavior listed above serve to satisfy a more general human need: the need for *mythos*-type thinking and behavior. The mental demands fulfilled by ludic activity appear to reflect a striving not only to explain reality, but also to express it. Human beings seek to know through experience and participation; they wish to satisfy their need for subjective apprehension of the world.

The specific functions of *quasi*-mythical behavior resemble the functions of ludic activity discussed in earlier sections of this article. This suggests that the need for *mythos* may provide the framework within which the entire sphere of ludicity should be analyzed. The observed convergence encourages the search for mythical elements even in those ludic forms that do not rely on the mediation of contemporary symbolic culture.

From the most general perspective, ludic behavior may be viewed as a result of the human psyche’s need for self-organization and of the desire for harmonious cooperation between *logos*-type and *mythos*-type modalities. Through such behavior, dialectical thinking may develop. A person becomes able to accept contradictions and synthesize them. Finally,

the individual acquires a relativistic perspective, expressed in a departure from dualistic modes of evaluation and in the recognition that many valid solutions may exist for any given dilemma.

Because of their narrative and interactive character, contemporary video games create spaces especially conducive to activating the *mythos*-type modality. Virtual worlds are environments of intense participation, role-playing, and cooperation within player communities. They create an imaginative reality with a high emotional and symbolic charge, enabling temporary detachment from everyday life. At the same time, activity in games requires constant decision-making, planning, and interpretation of complex messages, that is, processes characteristic of the *logos* modality. As a result, video games become a contemporary space in which *mythos* and *logos* can cooperate, leading to the integration of experience, reflection, and action. This may help explain the growing popularity of video games, which can function as substitutes for lost myths. Virtual player communities, in turn, operate like contemporary ritual groups: they offer a sense of belonging, loyalty, and fellowship, as well as access to a shared system of meanings.

Conclusion

Ludic behavior in adulthood fulfils a number of psychologically adaptive functions of considerable importance. Nevertheless, it seems doubtful that any single form of ludic activity could fulfill all of them simultaneously. The model presented here therefore describes only the maximum range of benefits that may arise from such activities. The discussion has been drawn upon literature referring, more or less directly, to ludic behavior, and constitutes an attempt to integrate and describe the various dimensions of the positive influence of play on human functioning.

At the same time, some contemporary forms of ludic activity fail to fulfil any psychological functions and may even inhibit human development. The English-language term *anti-leisure* has been coined to describe such maladaptive forms of ludic behavior.

¹¹ This concerns not so much personal development as transcendence of one’s own symbolic boundaries.

They do not contribute to the enrichment of the individual and do not fulfil recreational functions. Instead, they are undertaken compulsively and are accompanied by elevated levels of anxiety. They are also based on externally imposed constraints, which diminish the individual's sense of autonomy and authenticity (World Leisure..., 2001).

Some of these dangers were discussed earlier in relation to phenomena such as *katharsis*, pseudo-initiatory behavior, and optimal experience. A similarly inhibiting role may be played by various forms of addiction to media that transport individuals into culturally created realities, such as video games, gambling, or the internet, as well as by *alea*-type forms of play.

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