

A pattern of gold-colored circular confetti pieces scattered across the top half of the page.

Ludo

how play can transform your work

a gold confetti paper by
sheena greer

*do you really want to read another
whitepaper?

“Sheena often uses inappropriate humour and seeks attention in negative ways.”

sheena's 9th grade report card

Raised on a farm on a heavy diet of George Carlin, Patsy Cline and William Blake, Sheena Greer swung into the grown up world with the stubborn-hearted idea that being a girl was a moot point, and that we should do all we can to help each other.

A decade in the nonprofit sector has given Sheena a disruptive spirit and a lofty goal: she wants you to stop doing things the way they've always been done so you can start doing the things you were always meant to do.

She currently employs her inappropriate humour as a writer, helping nonprofits seek attention in positive ways by consulting with them on their communications and fundraising. She is a steadfast strategist, a master storyteller, and a midwife for good ideas.



Connect with Sheena



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Ludo
latin, verb: play


Colludo
latin, verb: play together



The power is out.

I am sitting in the dark, sipping cold tea. I am thinking about playing.

When I took my son to school this morning, he wanted to stop for a while to play in the snow.

“Not right now, buddy,” I said. “Mama’s got to get to work.”

Now I’m sitting in the grey light of winter storm clouds, my computer unusable without power, feeling at loose ends. I really wish I was playing in the snow with my boy.

Play is secondary. Or tertiary. Or completely out of the question. We think of it as something only children do. If we are wise, we recognize that for children, play is the most important part of their day.

For our kids, play is work. It is how they learn about the world, about relating to other people, and about themselves.

But somewhere along the way, this disappears.

I see it already practically gone from my two oldest sons, on the edge of adulthood.

I watch it disappearing in my daughter, who at 12 is just on the cusp of feeling pressure to spend her time on other “more productive” things.

I watch the spirit of play leaving her and I mourn. She is one of the most creative, playful people I know. And yet, her fate in the grown up world is the same that most of us share.

A life void of play.

Yes, some of us still do play. With our children, or on sports teams, and with a variety of hobbies.

But let's be honest. When life is hectic, these are the first things we let go of.

I can't make the soccer game tonight, I've got to hit this deadline.

I won't get to pottery class today, there was another emergency at work.

Not right now sweetie, Mommy is super busy.

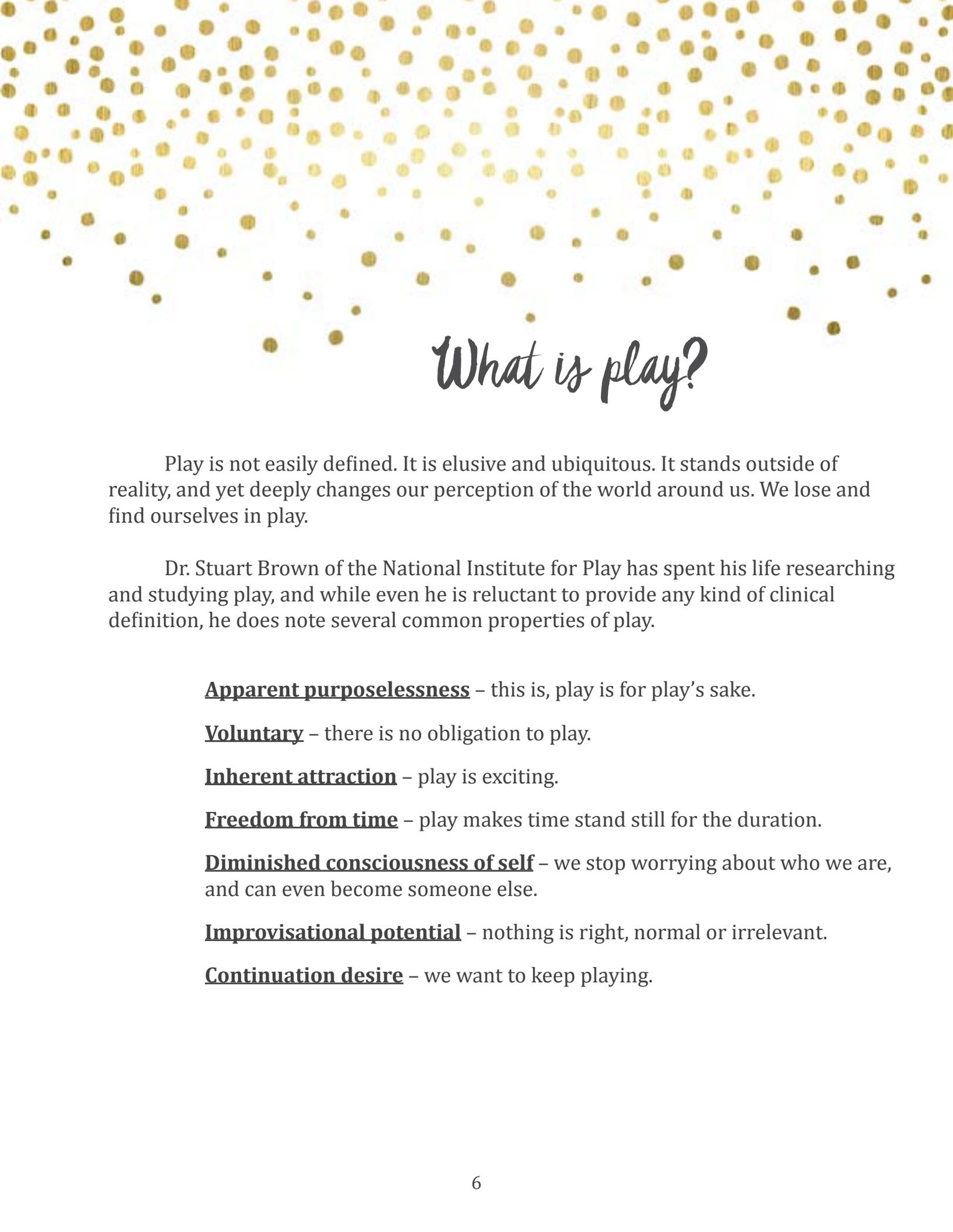
We actively say no to play on almost a daily basis.

And we lose so much more than just time when we do.

But the wonderful thing about play is that it doesn't hold a grudge. It doesn't require you to be in peak physical shape, or have studied any books, or even know the rules.

It only requires you to show up with an open mind and heart.

So. When is the last time you played?



What is play?

Play is not easily defined. It is elusive and ubiquitous. It stands outside of reality, and yet deeply changes our perception of the world around us. We lose and find ourselves in play.

Dr. Stuart Brown of the National Institute for Play has spent his life researching and studying play, and while even he is reluctant to provide any kind of clinical definition, he does note several common properties of play.

Apparent purposelessness – this is, play is for play's sake.

Voluntary – there is no obligation to play.

Inherent attraction – play is exciting.

Freedom from time – play makes time stand still for the duration.

Diminished consciousness of self – we stop worrying about who we are, and can even become someone else.

Improvisational potential – nothing is right, normal or irrelevant.

Continuation desire – we want to keep playing.

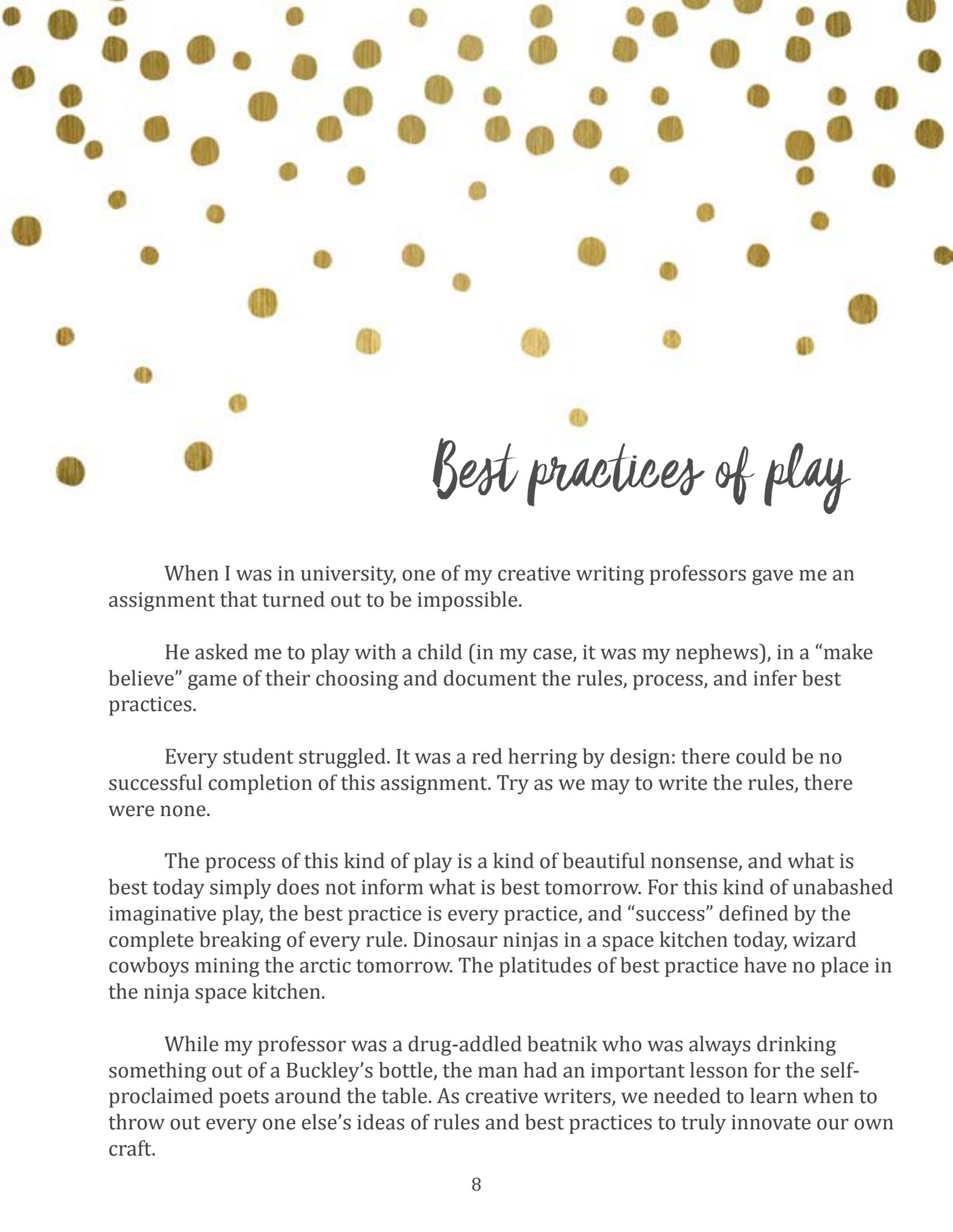
Brown also describes 7 types of play in which humans engage:

1. **Attunement**, where basic connections are formed, such as between newborn and mother.
2. **Body**, where our body and how it interacts with the world is explored.
3. **Object**, where we explore how we can handle, maneuver and manipulate physical objects.
4. **Social**, where we engage others in activities.
5. **Imaginative**, where we create scenarios in our mind and find ways of physically and emotionally manifesting them in our world.
6. **Narrative (or storytelling)**, where intellect and language intersect with how we relate to the world around us.
7. **Transformative (or integrative)**, where we are able to create something wholly new by transcending current realities.

Notice how these are easily described in terms of play activities found in children and as we move down the list, we find necessary conditions for innovation. Transformative play is paramount in innovation. What about attunement? Do we have the skills necessary to connect with each other in this way to play together in transformative ways? I realize this is a list and not a hierarchy, but I think there is something to be said of this basic kind of play in allowing us to come together to transform.

While play seems concrete enough, it is truly not a tangible thing. Like love, it is a state of being, and the act of definition quickly breaks it down into something so much less impactful than its whole. There is no right or wrong way to play. And this makes it an incredibly powerful tool for creative thinking.

It is a happy talent to know how to play
ralph waldo emerson



Best practices of play

When I was in university, one of my creative writing professors gave me an assignment that turned out to be impossible.

He asked me to play with a child (in my case, it was my nephews), in a “make believe” game of their choosing and document the rules, process, and infer best practices.

Every student struggled. It was a red herring by design: there could be no successful completion of this assignment. Try as we may to write the rules, there were none.

The process of this kind of play is a kind of beautiful nonsense, and what is best today simply does not inform what is best tomorrow. For this kind of unabashed imaginative play, the best practice is every practice, and “success” defined by the complete breaking of every rule. Dinosaur ninjas in a space kitchen today, wizard cowboys mining the arctic tomorrow. The platitudes of best practice have no place in the ninja space kitchen.

While my professor was a drug-addled beatnik who was always drinking something out of a Buckley’s bottle, the man had an important lesson for the self-proclaimed poets around the table. As creative writers, we needed to learn when to throw out every one else’s ideas of rules and best practices to truly innovate our own craft.

They say you need to know the rules before you break them. But in unstructured play, there are no rules (albeit, common sense safety guidelines like “don’t pull your sister’s hair” or “mud isn’t something we eat.”) The best practice is any practice that allows you to think outside the box – truly, there is no box. Unless that box is actually an oven on the moon.

We know best practices exist in our sector, and with reason. But there comes a point where it becomes detrimental to our roles and ourselves to follow such strict road maps. Because who we are as individuals is so closely tied to what we do in this sector, it is of great concern to ensure that we as individuals have the space within ourselves to explore, create, innovate and change.

If only our jobs could be wild west culinary interstellar sorcery. But somewhere between infinity and the confines of the dusty comb-bound/laminated document on your shelf entitled “Best Practices in <insert industry, organisation, idea>,” there is a space to be free in our ideas and our abilities to navigate with common sense innovation. It’s something we need to navigate daily, and the empty promise of a best practice only adds roadblocks to our relationships and our work.

Sometimes, the best practice is no official practice at all.

*If you want creative workers,
give them enough time to play*
john cleese

A cluster of several gold-colored circles of varying sizes is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page, partially overlapping the quote's signature.



Play in a culture of overwork

Chances are it has been a while since you really played. It also might feel a little strange. The idea of “adults playing” is somewhat taboo: either misconstrued as sexual, immature, or one of those dreadful icebreakers we have no choice but to participate in at the beginning of a professional (sit down, shut up and listen) workshop.

There is movement towards a greater understanding of the importance of play for adults, but the results are often lukewarm. That sweet open concept office culture, offering Friday beer pong potlucks and Lego brainstorm sessions, still prescribes (forced) team play as the ultimate condition for creativity and innovation. Not to say that beer pong and potlucks and Legos aren't awesome. It's just that this presupposes that institutionalized play will create a team. This doesn't take into account that individuals need to harness their own unique style of learning and play.

Play is an activity we spend so much time doing while we are young, and something we leave behind as we age. The unfettered and uninhibited ways of living playfully in our world is something we don't have a lot of time for in the grown up world.

Stresses of everyday life take over, and we learn to live strategically and mindfully, which usually means being focused on managing our homes, hammering through work. This leaves little time for an activity as seemingly frivolous as play. We focus on productivity, and play is seldom “productive” in a world where things need to get done and we increasingly have less time in the day for accomplishing our to-do lists.

This is a harsh reality of working in the nonprofit sector.

There is never enough money, time, energy, talent, or leadership to accomplish our massive missions. We chip away at it, little by little every day. We learn to survive in the scarcity. And our ability to make miracles happen by continually putting out fires only perpetuates an environment where fires are started in the first place.

“We learn to thrive in the urgent, not the important. We learn to survive in scarcity, not abundance.” – Tammy Zonker

This takes a harsh toll on us. As we serve the world’s most vulnerable, we become susceptible to something incredibly dangerous: the violence of overwork.

“There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist...most easily succumbs: activism and over-work.

The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work. It destroys the fruitfulness of his work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.” – Thomas Merton

Overwork as violence might sound a little extreme. But no doubt you have felt some very strong side-effects of overwork.

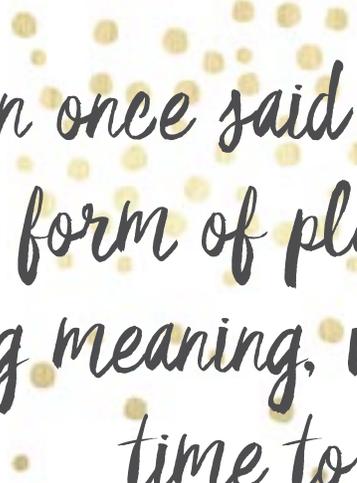
Have you ever...

- Got headaches from staring at your screen too long?
- Felt shoulder or back pain from working long hours?
- Been up all night worrying about work?
- Felt sick to your stomach thinking about work?
- Had jaw pain from grinding or clenching your teeth?
- Felt nervousness or anxiety about work?
- Been on the edge of tears in your office?
- Felt edgy or ready to snap at others?
- Had trouble thinking clearly?
- Felt paralyzed to make decisions?
- Had difficulty staying tuned in to conversations?
- Felt like you've lost your sense of humor?
- Felt guilty for no reason?
- Felt depressed and isolated in the work you do?
- Felt apathetic towards the work you do?
- Felt disconnected from your loved ones?
- Self-medicated – either pain killers, alcohol, or drugs – to cope?

These are just a few side-effects of stress and overwork. We don't have sore jaws because someone punched us in the face. We aren't up all night because someone is threatening us. The brute force of the work we do has real physical, emotional, and spiritual repercussions on our lives.

This is where play comes in.

Play is transformational. It is foundational. It can heal our bodies, reinvigorate our relationships, open our minds, help us solve problems, and connect us to each other. And in a field that requires us to heal, relate, solve big problems and make new connections, play is fundamental.



A wise man once said that all human activity is a form of play. If we waste time seeking meaning, we may have no time to live, or to play

arthur c clarke



The playdate model

After about a decade in the non-profit sector, I stepped out on my own to do freelance and consulting work. In my first year of somewhat being on the outside looking in to these , I noticed five themes in almost every conversation I had with people about the work they were doing.

- 1) They are severely stressed from being overworked
- 2) They feel terribly isolated at their desks – both from co-workers and from others in the sector
- 3) They feel trapped in a world of policies that don't give opportunities to think outside the box
- 4) They are wonderfully driven to do more – within their organisations and in the broader community of “do-gooders”
- 5) They are too stressed, isolated and trapped to even know where to begin

When I named my company Colludo, which is Latin for play together, it was my dream to not only playfully approach the work I was doing, but to help others find ways to playfully approach theirs. After all, we're doing something we deeply love, so this hard work of saving the world should be fun sometimes, right? But with so many expressing to me that there was no room for play in their worlds, I realized that I needed to do something.

And it was going to have to be ridiculously silly to really make a difference.

With that, the Colludo Playdate was born.

One day. Big ideas. Tough questions. And play.

The concept was very loose, and purposefully so. Forcing people to play is no better than forcing them through a rigorously dreadful strategic planning session. I mapped out a day that would allow participants to explore their thoughts within a framework, while keeping it organic enough for them to lead. The most planning on my end was simply bringing the group together – selecting personalities that were essentially strangers, but that I knew would encourage each other to really let loose.

I borrowed some basic concepts from the Gamestorming model – something that is especially big in the IT world. We did activities that were silly, but encouraged a kind of creative thinking model that most people would not have experienced in their day to day work. More than this, the experience was meant to create a safe place to talk about the work we do without fear. Fear of someone stealing our ideas, fear of someone using the negative things we say about our work against us, fear of being judged for having anything negative to say in the first place. It was designed to combat the scarcity all too present in our sector.

And combatting this with overt silliness was a perfect fit.

We made pompom monsters and talked about what sucks about our jobs. We made a paper garden and talked about what we do best and what we love most about our jobs, our sector. We made bugs and talked about what things we need and wish to develop to make ourselves better at our jobs. We ate freezies on a rooftop in a frigid prairie wind and talked about our big dreams – for our organisations and ourselves.

“What is more symbolic of our roles than eating freezies in the cold on a rooftop, overlooking the entire city?” said one participant.

In planning this day, I truly had no idea what to expect. At the very least, I could introduce a group of people to each other and hope that they might broaden their local network. But I really could not have anticipated the kind of critical thinking and sector problem solving that we did.

One of the most incredible and moving outcomes of the day came from talking about our pain points. Everyone around the table expressed their desire for stronger leadership within their organizations and in the sector as a whole. Later on, everyone expressed the desire to one day step into a leadership role.

The expressions on these faces when I held up a colourful sticky note that said “we need leadership” alongside one that said “we need to lead” was priceless.

In that moment, everyone joyfully recognized their own power to contribute to their organisations, to their sector, and to their community, in a way that was so obvious and yet so difficult to see from their regular old desks. The day was so successful that I began facilitating these sessions on a regular basis – for non-profit professionals, internally at non-profit organisations, and with community members from a variety of backgrounds.

It was clear that our sector really needed play.

“What I saw you do on stage was turn hundreds of earnest, serious, anxious fundraisers into an eager, yelping crowd of creative crazy people. All for the better, too: you turned the tone of the conference on its head and unleashed the inner “I’ll try anything” in folks. Creativity can be taught, as you showed ... it has a major positive impact on the fundraising bottom line ... and heck it’s just plain good for the heart and soul. Thank you!”

Tom Ahern
President, Ahern Communications

“The Playdate was something of a side road off the motorway. Thrum and hustle ceded, if only for a few hours, to the sort of slower motion meandering crucial to remembering why you hit the road in the first place. Meaningful conversations, shared experiences, sharpened thinking.

And play.

A most unique and unexpectedly fruitful day whose takeaways have since reinforced the essential role the scenic route plays in not-for-profit leadership.”

Shaun Dyer
John Howard Society

What other players had to say...

"I hate group activities. This introvert prefers to listen and process rather than engage and interact. Especially at conferences. However, Sheena's play time was honestly a highlight of the storytelling conference. I enjoyed laughing with my table mates as we furiously scribbled and coloured with crayons to create something totally unique and fun! Thanks to Sheena for redefining what "play" is at a conference!"

John Lepp,
Agents of Good

"The Playdate was a great day for me to get out of the office and refocus on what was important in my work. Being new to the non-profit world I was struggling with defining my role. I was being pulled in too many different directions which made it difficult to be effective. After the Playdate I was able to sit down and develop a detailed plan for going forward that would allow me to contribute in the most effective way. I was able to use this clarity to step away from some areas and stay focused on what was most important. Meeting others who are in similar positions and struggling with similar problems was great for me. I enjoyed being able to bounce ideas off people who had "been there and done that" in a supportive and collaborative environment. It was energizing and inspiring!"

Lindsay Sanderson
Habitat for Humanity Saskatoon

"Where's the LOVE button for Sheena and her playdates? In less than an hour, I watched as she took our quiet (read: apprehensive) room of 250+ professional do-gooders and turned them into a giggling bunch of crayon-wielding grade school kids. And in the process, she taught us that we can be more successful in our jobs (read: raise lots more money) when we make more space to play, explore and have a ton of plain ol' fun. Sheena brings magic and joy to all she creates, and her playdates are no different. So, if you're feeling stuck or BLAH in your fundraising and want to get back to what truly lights you up, order up a playdate for your staff stat (read: now). It's a heart-changer."

Shanon Doolittle
Fundraising Mentor + Nonprofit Storytelling
Conference Co-founder

"I had the most wonderful time at the Colludo Playdate. It was a safe environment where I could talk about how I really feel working for a non-profit, including my frustrations. I really felt listened to. It was also amazing to meet other people who also work in the non-profit sector and I felt really comfortable sharing my stories with them. It was also very fun to make crafts that we could take home with us."

Renata Cosic
International Women of Saskatoon

The opposite of play isn't work.
It's depression
dr. stuart brown

How to play

As I've noted, we can't really define play. But there are things you can do to help bring play into your life.

- 1) Stop thinking of play as a frivolous waste of time.** It is truly necessary for good personal health, for healthy relationships, and for big change.
- 2) Play with your kids.** Or someone else's. Our kids play almost as long as they are awake. Get off your chair, get down on the floor, and begin to explore the world alongside them. You'd be amazed how much you can learn about the world and yourself from 2 minutes sprawled out on a floor full of action figures.
- 3) Reminisce about play.** It's something most of us left behind when we left childhood, but likely some of your fondest memories are about childhood play. Remember what it was like to be young and to play, and relive some of those memories by playing those old favourites again.
- 4) Take time to play with other grown-ups.** Your partner, your friends, even your coworkers. Going out for drinks isn't really play – having a board game night, or playing tag in the park is. You'd be amazed by how great it feels to be playful with others.

5) Create a culture of play at your office. It doesn't matter if you're not management – there are things you can do every day to encourage others and create an environment that is safe for playing. If you model great play behaviour, you will naturally encourage others to join in.

6) Need help? Consider having me in to plan a playdate for your group. Or set up a call with me to help figure out some ways to bring play into your own life, and your own organisation.

7) Stay tuned... I have a few things up my sleeve for 2016 that will help you play even more!



This is the real secret of life: to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now. And instead of calling it work, realize it is play

alan watts



Why play?

When I was hired at my first non-profit job over a decade ago, it was my first taste of real adult life. I had been out on my own for years, but the academic world and the work world as we know are two very different beasts. I found myself immediately depressed, stressed, and feeling like I could hardly see an inch ahead of myself.

Then I started colouring.

I found an old colouring book and pencil crayons and brought them to my office. Every day, I took at least ten minutes, usually when I was feeling the most stressed or overwhelmed by my work, to just colour. Shapes. Objects. Cartoon characters. Princesses. Today, Cinderella had a blue ball gown. Tomorrow, she'll be shrouded in black. The next day, she was rainbow with insane eye makeup. It didn't matter. It was incredibly silly. And that was the point.

My coworkers noticed my play. At first, they teased a bit (I was the youngest by at least two decades, and spending ten minutes at a colouring book certainly didn't go unnoticed!) Eventually, they began to take time in their day to do something playful, too.

One woman started doing crossword puzzles in a comfy arm chair. Another brought a skipping rope. Eventually, a group of us got a hold of a joke book and would take a few minutes after lunch to read a joke and laugh before we got back to work. Someone brought in a book of daily meditations and we started each day sharing reflections on these bits of wisdom.

From these simple, playful ideas grew other practices of more general self-care. Staff potlucks. Walking breaks and meetings held at picnic tables in the park. Taking a day to stay at home and catch up on important field-related reading in the comfort of our pajamas.

Our work environment benefited tremendously, and our organisation had an incredibly productive year. And everyone was a lot happier. Was it because of play? Not fully, but it is hard to say what things might have looked like if we hadn't started incorporating play into our daily routines.

Play is crucial to a healthy, balanced life, and a powerful agent of change within an organisation. Play is disruptive. It shakes up our everyday way of approaching our work, each other, and even ourselves. And in a field where outdated best practices and overwork reign, we could all use an opportunity to play together.

*Men do not stop playing because
they grow old. They grow old
because they stop playing*

oliver wendell holmes

Neil Diamond's Swear Jar of Promises

How could I leave you without giving you a fun activity to try on your own?

Neil Diamond's Swear Jar of Promises is a fun, self-reflective play activity that aims to give you what you need most in moments of stress and frustration: a reminder of why you're here in the first place.



Instructions are simple:

- 1) Print out and cut the sheet of Neil Diamond promise cards included in this document. Print out as many sets as you'd like.
- 2) Complete the statements on each card.
- 3) Find yourself a jar, a box, or a container of some kind to keep your completed cards in. Keep it at your desk.
- 4) Any time you are feeling frustrated, stressed, worn-out, hopeless, apathetic, or wondering why you're even doing this work to begin with (one of those days where you might be swearing a lot at your desk), head to your swear jar and pull out as many cards as it takes to start feeling better about the work you're doing. And if that still doesn't work, email me.



I am



I am



I can



I can



I must



I must



I believe



I believe



I have



I feel