

# Exploring Play



Lisa D. Wood



## Holding on to Play: Reflecting on Experiences as a Playful K-3 Teacher

**P**lay and learning through play form the foundation of who I am as an early childhood professional. It has been my joy and honor to work and play with children, families, teachers, and communities throughout my career. My own childhood was full of play; it is a part of me, a part of my life story that I happily carry with me to this day.

Play is important for brain, cognitive, linguistic, physical, psychological, and social-emotional development and well-being. It is also a vitally important basic human need, with transformative potential (Sutton-Smith 1997; Brown & Vaughan 2009). For these reasons, the intersection of play and developmentally appropriate practice

has guided my philosophy as both learner and teacher—first as a preschool teacher, then as a teacher in public school K-3 classrooms, and now as an instructor of undergraduate students studying early childhood education. I have spent the past few years enthusiastically exploring play, the theory and research behind it, and its relationship to curriculum and practice. What did I learn?

Well, much like Robert Fulghum (2003), I discovered that perhaps all I really need to know I learned in kindergarten! I learned that for my personal well-being, I need to include play in my life, and I need to “play nice” with others

**Children need advocates for play, while teachers need a village to support their role as play-based early childhood education advocates.**

(even when other players do not). I learned that I need to make learning visible through documentation, much like show-and-tell, and find my voice as a play advocate through reflective journaling and professional development. I learned from the children I taught that when I allowed time in the classroom for play and trusted its vital importance, children learned, thrived, and grew by leaps and bounds! And finally, I learned that "no man is an island," and that all players need a village.

## **Gather Your Village**

When I reflect on my successes and challenges in implementing play-based curricula, especially in public school settings, I remember that one of my key approaches was keeping an open door. I often left the classroom door open as an invitation to families and other community members to come in, see what we were exploring, and play and learn *with us*. My hope was to create communal bonds across grade levels throughout the school, and to increase understanding of the value of a play-based curriculum among families and other teachers. However, that left me, a novice teacher, personally open to scrutiny and judgment, some of which I wasn't ready for. Consider this selection taken from one of my early kindergarten journal reflections, demonstrating my joys and self-doubts:

Bursts of sunlight stream through the windows of my kindergarten classroom and cast an array of prisms across the room. It is as if the sun illuminates our play invitations and entices players to explore the special items offered for their use. I am prepared to circulate around the room with my camera in my apron pocket and my clipboard in hand. I am eager to document observations and take dictation. As I scan the room I see children deeply engaged in the flow of play and learning. At the science center a pair of children busily explores spectrums and prisms, while another pair investigates rainbows with watercolor-filled beakers and eyedroppers. An adjacent trio intently explores the unexpected physical properties of a concoction of gluey gloop. The children are smiling, laughing, and talking about the surprise of their discoveries. . . .

Enya's song "Only Time" billows softly through the air until the flow of our play, or my enjoyment of it, is interrupted by my nagging doubts—what I've come to think of as my classroom bully—formed by negative thoughts, vulnerability, and questions that start to bubble up. "Exactly how will this benefit children's future test scores? How do I explain that they are learning and I am teaching, when it looks like we're all having so much fun? How can I justify including an outdoor recess later?"

As a novice teacher, I was full of commitment to, and faith in, play as the core of my curriculum. However, I did not have the words or the confidence to explain the magic of what was happening—the connection of children's playful experiences with their construction of knowledge and development of critical skills.

When I look back on that journal entry, I see clearly that the children were immersed in what Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow*: "Flow is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake" (1990, 6). I now have the language and the confidence to describe what I was doing and why it was important, but I have all-too-painful memories of redness creeping across my face and of bumbling through explanations of why play is important and how my teaching practices were helping children learn. I am not sure how convincing I was in my first years of public school teaching. I often felt my values shaken to the core: I needed more knowledge and language to advocate for play, and I needed to

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work harder to document play to make learning visible. And I knew I would need to gather a village to help keep play alive and keep at bay the bullies from inside my head and outside the classroom door.

In *It Takes a Village*, Hillary Rodham Clinton reminds us about our need for a village: "The village can no longer be defined as a place on a map, or a list of people or organizations, but its essence remains the same: it is the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives" (1996, 9). As we continue to see movement away from play and play-based learning in primary settings, now more than ever children and teachers need a village. Children need advocates for play, while teachers need a village to support their role as play-based early childhood education advocates. Moreover, teachers need the support of a village to empower and nurture their ongoing efforts to provide developmentally appropriate play experiences.

In Vivian Gussin Paley's keynote address at the 2011 NAEYC Annual Conference and Expo, she called on attendees to consider, "Who will save the kindergarten?" With the push down of academic expectations in primary grades, kindergarten, and preschool, the answer to this question likely depends on gathering a broader group of play advocates, including parents, preschool through grade 12 teachers and administrators, community members, foundations, museums, higher education faculty, and policy makers.

## Tug-of-War: Hold on Tight!

In the elementary setting in particular, remaining wholly committed to developmentally appropriate play-based curricula can be challenging. NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice recommend that teachers provide "experiences, materials, and interactions to enable children to engage in play that allows them to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interaction, and self-regulation" (2009, 18).

Like a game of tug-of-war, some teachers feel torn between honoring their philosophical grounding in developmentally appropriate practice and play and meeting mandates, closing the learning gap, and demonstrating accountability to administrators and the public at large. A K-3 teacher recently told me, "With high accountability, countless demands, and mandates, I simply feel defeated, burned out. And after all these years of



teaching, I am even beginning to question my beliefs about play! How can this be happening? What can I do?" We must remain firm in holding on to play as important in our guiding philosophies, holding fast to the promise to provide opportunities for play. Here are some strategies:

- ◆ Gather your village
  - Seek out supportive mentors, colleagues, and administrators
  - Include and involve parents, families, and community members
  - Reach out to organizations, museums, foundations, and institutions
  - Create communal bonds; hold advocacy events
- ◆ Build your play language and find your voice
  - Become well versed in developmentally appropriate practice
  - Keep knowledge current by reading articles, books, and research
  - Build play language for advocacy with professional development
- ◆ Make benefits of play visible
  - Use documentation, dictation, exhibition, and events to make the benefits of play in your classroom visible to the outside world
- ◆ Keep a journal
  - Use reflective journaling to empower yourself and your practice



Truth is, holding on to a commitment to be a play-based teacher is even more difficult now than when I was a classroom teacher. It seems to get tougher with each passing year. Current trends toward standardized curriculum and test-based content have led to an increase in time for direct instruction and a decrease in time for children to play in kindergarten. Between 1998 and 2011, there has been a significant decrease in the inclusion of hands-on math/science manipulatives, puzzles, blocks, art, dramatic play, and sand/water table play in the kindergarten classroom (Walston 2013). "Kindergartners today are facing: More focus on rigorous

academic skills, less focus on music, art, and creative activities, and higher academic and behavioral expectations when they enter kindergarten" (34). This might explain why novice and veteran kindergarten teachers alike feel they can no longer hold fast in their promise to play in kindergarten.



## Play Is What It's All About!

It is an exciting time for play, and teachers should feel hopeful. As I continue to reflect on my experiences and what I have learned from research about play and children's learning, I am more convinced now than ever that play is what it's all about! In fact, play has become the focus of much serious research over the past several years. "Playfulness (the drive to play) serves educative purposes complementary to those of curiosity. While curiosity motivates children to seek new knowledge and understanding, playfulness motivates them to practice new skills and use those skills creatively" (Gray 2013, 118). Scholars are speaking out on behalf of play and its benefits. Consider the words of researcher and theorist Stuart Brown:

We are built to play and built through play. When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality. Is it any wonder that often the times we feel most alive, those that make up our best memories, are moments of play? (Brown & Vaughan 2009, 5)

Drawing from neuroscience and cognitive, social, and developmental research, Brown invites a broad awareness of the importance of play and its vital role in well-being: "Play isn't the enemy of learning, it's learning's partner. Play is like fertilizer for brain growth. It's crazy not to use it" (Brown & Vaughan 2009, 101). Brown further emphasizes that play helps us reach our maximum developmental and neurological potential by contributing positively to our physical, emotional, psychological, and social development.

Play contributes to the development of creativity, optimism, and innovation. Pretend play offers children the opportunity to express "many different processes—cognitive, affective, and interpersonal—important for creativity" (Russ & Wallace 2013, 136), and theorists and researchers conclude that "pretend play and creativity are linked" (136). Pretend play allows children to creatively and symbolically play with objects, use their imaginations, and tell stories (Russ & Wallace 2013). It allows children to experiment with role-playing and narrative to imagine how they might navigate through their ever-changing world: "Children bring the realities of their world into a fictional context, where it is safe to confront them, to experience them, and to practice ways of dealing



### Are the Benefits of Play Visible in Your Classroom?

This checklist suggests ways to show the role of play in the learning process and advocate for play in your classroom.

- ☐ Document and take dictation regularly throughout the day
- ☐ Display child-created work prominently in the classroom and in the hall
- ☐ Display prominently digital images of children playing, working, exploring, creating, and making indoors and outdoors in my classroom and in the hall
- ☐ Pair visual displays of images and children's work with documentation
- ☐ Display documentation of brainstorming activities, children's emergent dictation, and dialogue to provide a road map of the thinking/learning process
- ☐ Involve parents, children, and community members in documentation

Include the following in your documentation:

- ☐ Research, curriculum, pedagogical, theoretical, or inspirational quotes to support play, developmentally appropriate practice, physical, social, and emotional growth
- ☐ Standards, core curriculum, early childhood foundations, developmental milestones, and teaching proficiencies that apply
- ☐ Descriptions of properties of play, play personalities, and play processes

## Families and Play

These tips suggest ways to build play partnerships with families and communicate the importance of play throughout the year.

### Back to School

- Build the foundation for a play partnership by hosting a back-to-school play event. Here are some suggestions:
  - Introduce families to play and playful learning in their children's learning environment with a visual presentation. Explain why play is important and the ways you observe, document, and/or assess the learning and development children gain through play. Follow with an interactive discussion about nurturing your play partnership.
  - Invite administrators, principals, and staff to attend the event, play, and explain their role in supporting children, families, and play.
  - Use the suggestions inspired by play personalities (see p. 94) to engage both adults and children in play. Join in and share your playful nature!
  - Invite family members to draw and/or write about their favorite play memories and children to draw and/or write about their own play interests. Encourage them to display their creations side by side on a documentation wall.
  - Encourage families to ask questions and share feedback about play and participating in a play partnership.
  - Cocreate written promises or commitments to play and playful learning.
  - Provide time for children and families to play actively outdoors or in a gross motor room.
  - Conclude by gathering families for a playful communal activity.
  - Invite everyone to cheer a promise to support the cocreated commitment!

### Daily

- Make the benefits of play visible through documentation (see the checklist on p. 91).
- Share playful images and documentation narratives on your classroom website or blog.

- Welcome families' questions and concerns by exchanging dialogue or anecdotal notes about their children's play at school and home, their interests, and their friendships.
- Build a family lending library that includes resources about the importance of play, along with play materials such as games, cards, puppets, and toys.

### Weekly

- Feature mini-documentation panels and family-friendly quotes, research, and resources about the importance of play in your newsletter.
- Highlight one family each week by sharing stories and images of their family at play.
- Inform families of playful opportunities, resources, and community events.
- Engage families in an interactive Q&A forum about play or playful learning, or provide a question box. Respond with current information, and provide examples from children's learning environment or at home.

### Monthly/Bi-Monthly

- Engage in individual and group discussions with families about play and its importance.
- Encourage families to form, join, and participate in organizational play advocacy groups or events in the community.
- Collaborate with families to plan monthly/bimonthly play events.
- Host a family play night. Share a short skit, video, or slideshow about the importance of play to kick off the night's events, and invite families to share their own traditional or cultural play activities.

### 100th Day of School

- Partner with families to organize a "100 Days/Ways of Play and Playful Learning" celebration.

### School Year Grand Finale

- Reflect and share stories, images, and dialogue with families to celebrate a playful year of growth, learning, and well-being.
- Share ideas and opportunities for extending play and playful learning over the summer break.
- PLAY!

with them" (Gray 2013, 169). These kinds of play experiences scaffold the creativity, imagination, optimism, coping, resilience, and social-emotional development essential to well-being. David Elkind further emphasizes that play is a part of our creative drive, as a fundamental mode of learning and a "basic right of childhood!" (2007, xvii). Richard Louv is leading the movement to bring pretend play and all kinds of play outdoors, and to save children from what he calls "nature deficit disorder" (2008, 10).

For teachers, an important step is to find or rediscover our voice and our ability to express the importance of play and developmentally appropriate practice. Understanding the properties, personalities, processes, stages, and states of play (Brown & Vaughan 2009), as I teach them now to preservice teachers, helps prepare both novice and veteran teachers to embed this knowledge into developmentally appropriate teaching philosophies, curricula, documentation, and classroom environments.

## The Beauty of Play

To Stuart Brown, play is "a thing of beauty," and he sees it as critical for animals, children, and adults alike (Brown & Vaughan 2009). He does not, however, give any single, absolute definition of play. Instead, he breaks play into properties that explain the reasons we play and the styles or personalities of play that describe the ways individuals engage in it (see "Brown's Properties of Play" and "Practical Suggestions for K-3 Settings Based on Play Personalities," p. 94). Thinking about play through these frameworks helps teachers to understand, document, and meet the individual needs of children through the classroom environment—creating the right set-up and design, selecting materials, and varying instruction and facilitation to scaffold learning. These play frameworks give us yet another lens through which to observe and document children's growth and learning through the "beauty of play," and to reflect on our practice to better support the individual needs of all children.

## Brown's Properties of Play

Stuart Brown breaks play into seven properties that explain the reasons we play and the styles or personalities of play that describe the ways individuals engage in it.

- **Apparently purposeless:** No obvious survival value; play for play's sake
- **Voluntary:** Not required; optional
- **Inherent attraction:** Exciting, attractive, feels good
- **Freedom from time:** Lose sense of time
- **Diminished consciousness of self:** Lose self in the zone or flow of play; during imaginative play, might pretend to be a different self
- **Improvisation potential:** Lose rigidity in the way we do things; open to chance, opportunity, and serendipity
- **Continuation desire:** A drive or desire to keep doing it

Adapted with permission from Brown & Vaughan (2009), 17-18.

## Empowering Your Practice Through Creative/Reflective Journaling

These tips will help you make journaling a part of your routine to empower your inner player and nurture yourself as a teacher.

- Record observations and reflect on the classroom environment, invitations, dialogue, daily life, and play.
- Reflect on your celebrations, struggles, and hopes.
- Brainstorm child-centered interests and needs as they emerge.
- Record ideas for emergent curricula and play invitations to entice children to explore special activities and materials.
- Create webs and mind maps of possible integration of play within the curriculum.
- Include books, quotes, websites, blogs, and resources to inspire you.
- Reflect on memorable moments as a teacher that remind you of why you teach.
- Write or sketch memories of your own play as a child; discover and embrace your own play personality and inner player.
- Use technology to journal by starting a play blog.
- Play and correspond with your imaginary mentor, someone who inspires you.
- Write questions to ask your imaginary mentor.
- Doodle, sketch, collage, draw, paint, and create comics of yourself and the classroom.
- Create a cover for your journal, or allow time for your cover to emerge and evolve.



## Practical Suggestions for K-3 Settings Based on Play Personalities

| Personality  | Teaching Strategies   | What Children Learn   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>The Joker</b> enjoys nonsense, baby talk, practical jokes, pranks, horseplay, and comedy                                | Provide lighthearted opportunities for comedy, joke telling/writing. Include: children's joke books, riddles, poetry, prose, toy microphones, stage props, silly hats, costumes for play and improvisation.   | <b>Language Development:</b> Increased vocabulary, speaking audibly, expressing thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly. Speaking and listening during interactive conversations. Anticipation of tones, cues, phrases, facial expressions, and conversational reciprocity.   |
| <b>The Kinesthete</b> loves to move, dance, walk, swim, and participate in sports (movement is the focus, not competition) | Integrate body movement into indoor/outdoor curriculum, activities, and lessons. Include yoga, dance, and stretching during transitions. Enjoy indoor/outdoor movement activities with the children!  | <b>Gross Motor Development:</b> Strength, balance, and stability through movement and control of body parts, repetition/imitation of actions via direct instruction or improvisation; rhythm and free-form movement. <b>Math Concepts:</b> While moving, count to 100 by ones, fives, and tens. <b>Social-Emotional Development:</b> Well-being, body movement/emotion.   |
| <b>The Explorer</b> engages in physical, emotional, mental, and creative exploration of our world and imaginations         | Provide opportunities for inquiry, indoor and outdoor exploration, creativity, problem solving, sand/water and other sensory experiences. Include natural and found objects, field guides, binoculars, magnifying glasses, containers for exploring/collecting samples or artifacts, maps, mapmaking invitations, multicultural dolls/figures, cooking utensils, dress-up clothes, and props. | <b>Science, Math, Geography, Social Studies, Literacy Concepts:</b> Scientific method, inquiry, experimentation, sorting, identification, measurement, similarities, differences, physical properties and attributes of artifacts, classification, student-generated writing and drawing activities to describe/document discoveries about the world and living environment around them. <b>Social Skills:</b> Self-confidence, discussion, communication, sharing, and collaboration with peers. |
| <b>The Competitor</b> tends to be less interested in creative engagement, enjoys playing rule-bound games and winning      | Provide indoor/outdoor curricular and free play opportunities for physical game playing, board games, and other forms of games.   | <b>Math Concepts:</b> Problem solving, counting, sequencing, pairing and shapes recognition. <b>Physical Development:</b> Fine/gross motor. <b>Social-Emotional Development:</b> Following simple rules, cooperation, turn taking. <b>Literacy Concepts:</b> Reading or listening to instructions.  |
| <b>The Director</b> loves power and is a born organizer  | Provide child-directed open materials and invitations: blocks, puzzles, object sorting, letters, counting, mapmaking, organization, and time for free play. Try setting up a recycling center for classification and sorting.   | <b>Social-Emotional Development:</b> Invitations, open materials to foster social-emotional development, autonomy, and confidence. <b>Math, Science, and Literacy Concepts:</b> Sorting, counting, classification, organization, direction, and sequence of events.   |

(continued)

| Personality  | Teaching Strategies  | What Children Learn  |
|--|--|--|
| The Collector is interested in collecting objects or experiences   | Provide opportunities to collect objects and natural materials; allow children time to collage, document, and share objects, interests, and experiences.   | Math, Social Studies, Art, Geography, Science, Literacy Concepts: Artifact telling, retelling, and storytelling in oral, written, and visual form. Sorting and expressing preferences for object attributes and collage design.  |
| The Artist/Creator enjoys making, creating artwork, tinkering, and inventing   | Provide a variety of open-ended artistic materials and open time for art making, sensory experiences, cartooning, tinkering, creating, and inventing. Provide a wide range of recycled and natural materials, cardboard boxes, clock or machine parts, and tinkering tools to inspire imagination and invention.                     | Art, Creativity, Fine Motor Development, Sustainability: Understanding physical properties/manipulation of art materials; visual representation, color properties/recognition, use of line, repetition, texture, shape, emotion, planning, abstract vs. realism; self-expression, sensory experience, meaning making, imagination, invention, problem solving; use of natural/recycled materials.      |
| The Storyteller can be a writer, reader, performer, magician, filmmaker; someone who loves improv and enjoys including themselves in the imaginative stories they tell | Offer a rich array of materials for an ever-changing dramatic play area, including stage, props, costumes, puppets for theater/dramatic play; fairy tales, literature, and time for oral storytelling/story writing. Document student-dictated stories and/or allow students to record themselves with digital recorders or cameras. | Reading, Language Arts, Language Development, and Technology Concepts: Reading/love of literature; oral storytelling, acting, and reenacting stories/events; creating, writing, and illustrating stories; describing familiar and imaginary people, places, things, and events; adding details, expressing feelings, thoughts, and ideas associated with stories; documenting stories with technology. |

Column one adapted with permission from Brown & Vaughan (2009), 65–70.

## Pacify the Bullies

Having experienced my own bullies, I began to read everything I could about documentation, the Reggio Emilia experience, and play. I reached out to mentors, NAEYC members, and supportive colleagues and administrators, and I even visited the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, to learn firsthand. And I read, read, and read. Along with reading, I continued to reflect in my journal. I gained particular inspiration from favorite authors and play advocates, including Vivian Gussin Paley. Finding my own inner player, I addressed Vivian Paley in my journals, thinking of her as my imaginary mentor.

Soon I saw my identity expand from teacher to teacher–researcher and advocate. My experiences nurtured and validated my thinking about the role of play and learning in the lives of children. This new understanding prepared me to talk about and defend the importance of play more clearly. For instance, in the classroom and outside the door I posted documentation panels displaying children's emergent narratives and photographs of the children playing—creating, smiling, working, learning, and growing. Alongside these panels I added quotations from authors, psychologists, and theorists explaining the cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional value, the learning outcomes, and the importance of play and play-based learning. I incorporated smaller versions in family newsletters. I also engaged in individual and group conversations with families about



**Memo to: A Primary Grade Principal**

**From: Marilou Hyson**

**Date: January 2015**

**Subject: Why Play Is a Pathway to Learning**

As the leader of a learning community, you're responsible for ensuring that all students advance toward positive outcomes. Fortunately, for children in pre-K, kindergarten, and the early primary grades, you have an all-purpose tool available: well-planned intentional play both indoors and out.

Research and recommendations from professional organizations like NAEYC and the National Association of Elementary School Principals can bolster your confidence in the value of playful learning experiences. Make-believe or role play, playful investigation of materials and ideas, playing games with rules, engaging in vigorous outdoor play—all of these will build knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes toward learning. Participating in rich pretend play can encourage dual language learners and children with language delays to use more complex language. Playful activities help children with disabilities become more engaged—and we know greater engagement predicts better outcomes. Play can help children who struggle with self-regulation become better able to manage their emotions, ideas, and behaviors. And by incorporating play experiences that are well-aligned with the Common Core State Standards and other early learning standards, teachers can promote positive outcomes for all children without discouraging them from the joy of learning: “the use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations in this document” (NGA Center & CCSSO 2010, 6).

But using any tool effectively requires considerable skill and practice. You can support teachers' integration of playful learning by affirming play's importance (a lot of learning may take place in a noisy classroom), and by offering teachers in-depth professional development in how to develop children's play skills and make the most of play in a quality pre-K–grade 3 curriculum.

Play is not a break from learning, but a pathway toward learning.

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NGA Center (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices) & CCSSO (Council of Chief State School Officers). 2010. “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.” [www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA\\_Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA_Standards.pdf).

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play and its importance. Documentation demonstrates the value of play and practice to families and a broad audience.

At some point, I looked around and realized I had created my own small village of play advocates! Not only did documentation help to grow support for play, it grew our village with a “network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives” (Clinton 1996, 9).

## Reflect, Empower, and Play!

Profoundly influenced by Paley’s works, I made the decision at the beginning of my career to maintain a reflective journal. Long before gathering my village, I sought to empower my own development as a teacher by reflecting on the stories, thoughts, photos, and observational notes I collected each day. Journaling and documenting life, play, and learning in the classroom takes considerable time, but it quickly became a part of my routine—and the payoff in terms of nurturing my soul, spirit, and understanding of who I am as a teacher was well worth it.

So, what lessons from kindergarten have I yet to master? For one, making the time to play. Perhaps one of the hardest lessons to learn as a teacher is to take time to nurture one’s own play. Thinking about our own play memories and play personalities and setting aside a mere 60 minutes a week to just play and be playful is vital for our well-being. Play transforms our practice, our play advocacy, and ourselves (Nell & Drew 2013). “Play energizes us and enlivens us. It eases our burdens. It renews our natural sense of optimism and opens us up to new possibilities” (Brown & Vaughan 2009, 166). Attention, all players: get back in the game, hold on tight, and *play*!

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