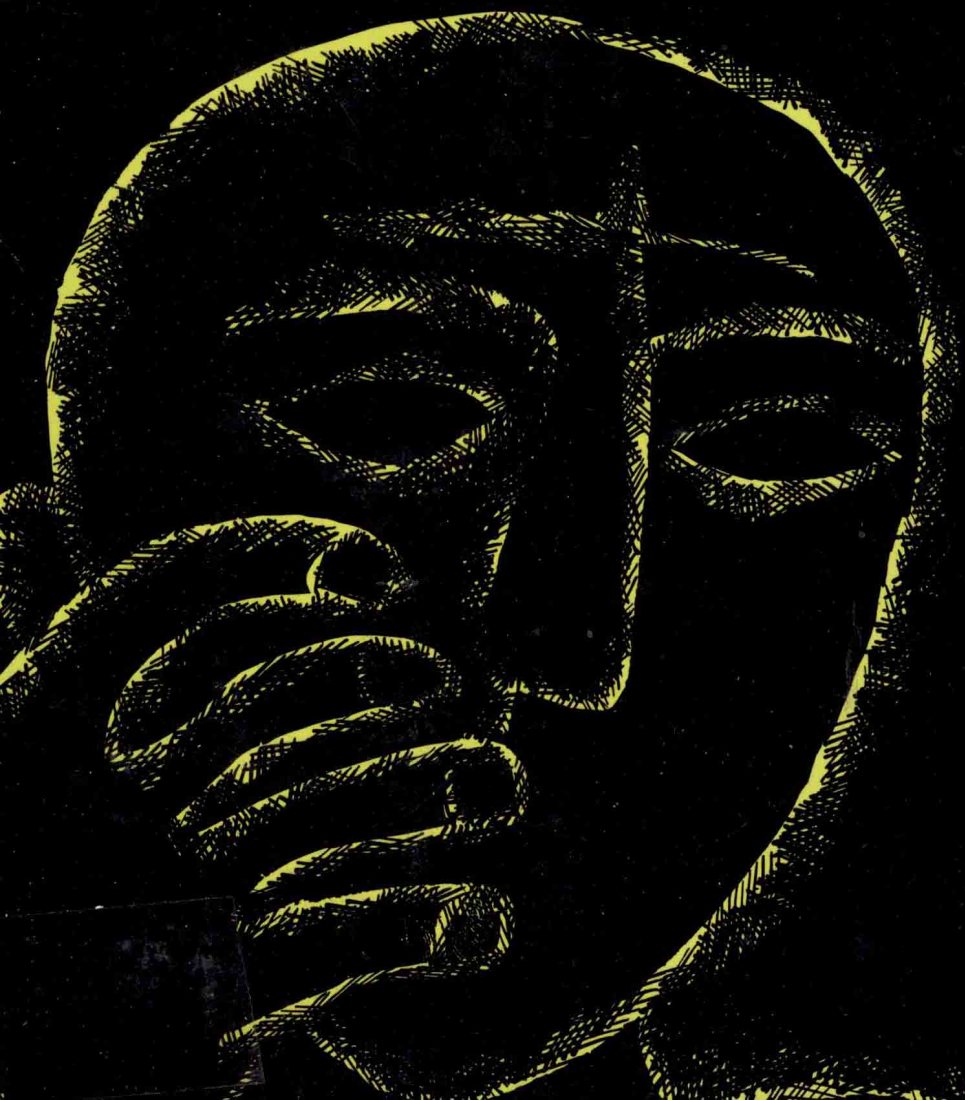
BEYOND BOREDOM AND ANXIETY

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



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The Experience of Play in Work and Games
by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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Preface

When Atys was king of Lydia in Asia Minor some three thousand years ago, a great scarcity threatened his realm. For a while people accepted their lot without complaining, in the hope that the times of plenty would return. But when things failed to get better, the Lydians devised a strange remedy for their problem. "The plan adopted against the famine was to engage in games one day so entirely as not to feel any craving for food," Herodotus writes, "and the next day to eat and abstain from games. In this way they passed eighteen years." And along the way they invented the dice, knuckle-bones, the ball, and "all the games which are common to them with the Greeks" (Herodotus, *Persian Wars,* Book 1, Chapter 94).

The account may be fictitious, but it points at an interesting fact: people do get immersed in games so deeply as to forget hunger and other problems. What power does play have that men relinquish basic needs for its sake? This is the question that the studies reported in *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* were designed to answer. It is a question that cuts into some of the central issues with which the behavioral sciences deal.

Most theories of human motivation depend on a "deficit model," which assumes that only a limited number of pleasurable physiological states exist; according to this model, behavior is simply a set of innate and learned responses directed toward satisfying basic needs. This closed homeostatic model, which grew out of observations made in the laboratory or on the couch, has some important implications. It suggests that one can derive enjoyment only from a finite number of experiences and objects. Therefore, life must be inherently painful because scarce resources of enjoyment lead to competition and only a few can get more than intermittent satisfaction. For Freud, the libido is the source of all pleasure; but since the requirements of social life conflict with libidinal desires, discontent is the lot of civilized man. All theories of behavior that reduce enjoyment to the satisfaction of needs, whether they are held by economists or behaviorists, come to the same conclusion: the needs can never be fully satisfied.

But the study of play leads to a different picture of motivation. One sees people involved in a great variety of activities which provide none of the rewards that a closed model predicts must be there. One soon begins to realize that almost any object or any experience is potentially enjoyable. The task is to find out how this potential can be translated into actuality. If it is true that enjoyment does not depend on scarce resources, the quality of life can be greatly improved.

This book addresses also a second set of issues. The dominant assumption in the behavioral sciences is that observable actions are the only legitimate data. As a result, inner experience has been exiled to a scientific no-man's-land. Yet the crucial locus of psychological events is still the psyche; our thoughts and our feelings, not our "objective" behavior, give meaning to life. Play is a good example of this truism; here concrete behavior is an unreliable guide for understanding the phenomenon. It is not so much what people do but how they perceive and interpret what they are doing that makes the activity enjoyable.

And it makes a great deal of difference to a person whether his acts are enjoyable or not, even though the differ-

ence is not noticeable to an outside observer. When a person acts because his behavior is motivated by the enjoyment he finds in the behavior itself, he increases his self-confidence, contentment, and feeling of solidarity with others; if the behavior is motivated by external pressures or external rewards, he may experience insecurity, frustration, and a sense of alienation. This is a vital distinction, yet one that is rarely made. At a time when psychology is developing means for controlling behavior through electronic implants, drugs, behavior-modification programs, and a whole armory of other intrusive techniques, it is vital to preserve an understanding of the active, creative, self-motivated dimensions of behavior. The study of play seems to offer one such opportunity.

Man at play, as thinkers from Plato to Sartre have observed, is at the peak of his freedom and dignity. If we can find out what makes play such a liberating and rewarding activity, we can start applying this knowledge outside of games as well. Perhaps Plato was right, and it is possible after all to "live life as play." But in this last quarter of the twentieth century, when despite unprecedented prosperity and control of the environment people seem to feel more destitute and unfree than ever before, the intuitive grasp of playfulness is difficult to recapture. Hence the studies reported here, which attempt to describe, as analytically and objectively as possible, the experience of enjoyment and the structural contexts in which it occurs.

One fact seemed clear from the beginning: the immersion into enjoyable experience which is typical of play occurs frequently outside of games. Indeed, the ideas presented here began to crystallize in my mind about a dozen years ago, as I was observing artists at work. One thing struck me as especially intriguing. Despite the fact that almost no one can make either a reputation or a living from painting, the artists studied were almost fanatically devoted to their work; they were at it night and day, and nothing else seemed to matter so much in their lives. Yet as soon as they finished a painting or a sculpture, they seemed to lose all interest in it. Nor were they interested much in each other's paintings or in great masterpieces. Most artists

did not go to museums, did not decorate their homes with art, and seemed to be generally bored or baffled by talk about the aesthetic qualities of the works they or their friends produced. What they did love to do was talk about small technical details, stylistic breakthroughs—the actions, thoughts, and feelings involved in making art. Slowly it became obvious that something in the activity of painting itself kept them going. The process of making their products was so enjoyable that they were ready to sacrifice a great deal for the chance of continuing to do so. There was something about the physical activities of stretching canvas on wooden frames, of squeezing tubes of paint or kneading clay, of splashing colors on a blank surface; the cognitive activity of choosing a problem to work on, of defining a subject, of experimenting with new combinations of form, color, light, and space; the emotional impact of recognizing one's past, present, and future concerns in the emerging work. All these aspects of the artistic process added up to a structured experience which was almost addictive in its fascination.

Artists provided the clue for the importance of intrinsic motivation. Their acts implied that work can give enjoyment and meaning to life. It was a simple and obvious message, yet full of tantalizing implications. Did these artists enjoy their work because the subject matter was art or because the pattern of actions required by their work was in itself rewarding? In other words, is enjoyment of work unique to creative people doing creative tasks, or can everyone experience it if some set of favorable conditions is met? If everyone can experience such enjoyment, then boring everyday tasks might also be turned into enjoyable and meaningful activities.

In my search for answers, three main fields of psychological literature seemed most promising. Eventually all three proved helpful, although none resolved all questions. The first field was writings on self-actualization and peak experiences: the work of psychologists like Abraham Maslow or accounts of ecstatic experiences such as provided by Marghanita Laski. These works contain detailed descriptions of the subjective feelings with which I had become familiar through the reports of artists. But these writings do not provide concrete explanations

of what makes peak experiences possible. A second promising field was the literature on intrinsic motivation. Robert White, D. E. Berlyne, Richard De Charms, and a number of other psychologists have been trying to isolate characteristics of stimuli that make them enjoyable (characteristics such as novelty) or states of the person that make him enjoy a situation (for instance, feelings of competence or personal causation). This approach abounds in concrete studies, but most of them are experimental in nature, and although they suggest important ideas, it is difficult to extrapolate from the findings to conditions of everyday life. Finally, there was the literature on play. Play provides peak experiences and intrinsic motivation; and I had, of course, noticed a playful quality in the work and concurrent experience of the artists whom I had observed. Perhaps the phenomenon of play could give the unifying concept needed to solve the riddle of why certain activities are enjoyable. But writings on play turn out to have their own limitation. Scholars in this field seem to assume that play is removed from "real" life; whenever an act has consequences that matter outside a playful context, it ceases to be play. To accept this assumption would have meant that the concept of play is useless for studying how everyday life can be made more enjoyable.

To escape from this impasse, I decided to begin a series of studies combining the three approaches. The goal was to focus on people who were having peak experiences, who were intrinsically motivated, and who were involved in play as well as real-life activities, in order to find out whether I could detect similarities in their experiences, their motivation, and the situations that produce enjoyment.

The results are reported in this volume. (For details about the study and the contents of the various chapters, see Chapter One.) The results suggest that anything one does can become rewarding if the activity is structured right and if one's skills are matched with the challenges of the action. In this optimal condition, people enjoy even work, extreme danger, and stress. To change a boring situation into one that provides its own rewards does not require money or physical energy; it can be achieved through symbolic restructuring of information.

So it appears that the sources of enjoyment are not finite and that life can be made infinitely more rewarding if we learn how to use the opportunities lying all around us. Of course, the task is full of difficulties. As the Italians say: *Tra il dire e il fare c'è di mezzo il mare*—"An ocean lies between saying and doing." But it is never too early to raise these issues, and perhaps it is not too late.

Acknowledgments

There are two sources without which this project would have been impossible to carry out. One is the Applied Research Branch, Social Problems Research Committee, of the National Institute of Mental Health, which provided the necessary financing. The other indispensable help came from the people interviewed; these people—more than three hundred in number—gave generously of their time to enable us to derive some conclusions about the dynamics of enjoyment.

This has been a collaborative enterprise, in which the contributions of several people were integrated in a joint product. Specifically, Gary Becker collected interviews with male chess players and basketball players. Paul Gruenberg interviewed rock climbers and some basketball players. John MacAloon also worked with rock climbers. Jean Hamilton Holcomb interviewed surgeons, and she analyzed the data with Isabella Csikszentmihalyi. Judy Hendin interviewed rock dancers, and Sonja Hoard interviewed modern dancers. Pamela Perun collected the data on women chess players. Henry Post interviewed composers. John Eggert provided statistical assistance at various points of the project. Geri Cohen and Ronald Graef ran the deprivation experiments, and the latter helped in writing up the results.

Several colleagues expressed interest in the ideas contained in this work, and their moral support was invaluable to me in pursuing the elusive concepts with which we are dealing. I must especially thank Donald Campbell of Northwestern University, Brian Sutton-Smith of Columbia University Teachers College, Gerald Kenyon of the University of Waterloo, and

Thomas Greening, editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, for the encouragement they have been so generous with. At my own university, the enthusiasm of Victor Turner and Bernice Neugarten was always helpful. William E. Henry provided many useful suggestions which were incorporated in the revision of the manuscript. Finally, I must thank Alice Chandler for the expert administrative supervision she gave the project, and Gwen Stevenson for typing the manuscript.

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As is customary, the reader is asked to absolve the persons and institutions mentioned above of all blame and to hold me solely responsible for any shortcomings.

Chicago Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
September 1975

Contents

Chapter *1*

Enjoyment and Intrinsic Motivation

In a world supposedly ruled by the pursuit of money, power, prestige, and pleasure, it is surprising to find certain people who sacrifice all those goals for no apparent reason: people who risk their lives climbing rocks, who devote their lives to art, who spend their energies playing chess. By finding out why they are willing to give up material rewards for the elusive experience of performing enjoyable acts, we hope to learn something that will allow us to make everyday life more meaningful. At present, most of the institutions that take up our time—schools, offices, factories—are organized around the assumption that serious work is grim and unpleasant. Because of this assumption, most of our time *is* spent doing unpleasant things. By studying enjoyment, we might learn how to redress this harmful situation.

To be sure, one may see the behavior of people dedicated to the pursuit of enjoyment as useless, the result of deviant

socialization toward meaningless goals. Psychologists may account for it as sublimated variants of the pursuit of real needs which cannot be directly satisfied. Our interest in the matter relies on a different assumption: if we can learn more about activities which are enjoyable in themselves, we will find clues to a form of motivation that could become an extremely important human resource.

The management of behavior, as presently practiced, is based on the tacit belief that people are motivated only by external rewards or by the fear of external punishment. The stick and the carrot are the main tools by which people are made to pull their weight. From the earliest months of life, children are threatened or cajoled into conformity with parental demands; when they go on to school, grades and symbolic promotions are used to make them move along predetermined paths. Even the concepts of identification or internalization are based on the idea that the child is afraid of his parents or envies their status. By the time they grow to be adults, most people have been conditioned to respond predictably to external cues, usually represented by the symbolic rewards of money and status.

There is no question that this motivational system, evolved by societies over a long period of centuries, is quite effective. By objectifying incentives into money and status, societies have developed a rational, universal motivational system whereby communities can produce desired behaviors predictably and can allot precisely differentiated rewards to construct a complex social hierarchy. The standardization of external rewards, and the general acceptance of their value by most members of society, has created the "homo economicus" responsive to the laws of supply and demand and the "homo sociologicus" who is kept within bounds by the network of social controls.

The commonsense assumption is that extrinsic rewards like money and status are basic human needs—or, in behaviorist terms, primary reinforcers. If this were true, it would be quite hopeless to try substituting satisfaction with one's job for external rewards. But there are good reasons to believe that striving

for material goods is in great part a motivation that a person learns as part of his socialization into a culture. Greed for possessions is not a universal trait. Anthropological evidence shows that there are cultures in which material goals do not have the importance we attribute to them (Polanyi, 1957). Even in our society, children have to learn "the value of a dollar"; only because every accomplishment in our culture has a dollar tag to it do children learn to appreciate financial rewards above all else. Other evidence that supports this view is the presence of people, within our society, who choose to expend energy for goals that carry no conventional material rewards. These are the people we deal with in the present study, hoping to learn from them the dynamics of intrinsic motivation.

But why should one worry about extrinsic rewards? If they are successful, why try to moderate their effect with recourse to intrinsic motives? The fact is that the ease with which external rewards can be used conceals real dangers. When a teacher discovers that children will work for a grade, he or she may become less concerned with whether the work itself is meaningful or rewarding to students. Employers who take for granted the wisdom of external incentives may come to believe that workers' enjoyment of the task is irrelevant. As a result, children and workers will learn, in time, that what they have to do is worthless in itself and that its only justification is the grade or paycheck they get at the end. This pattern has become so general in our culture that by now it is self-evident: what one *must* do cannot be enjoyable. So we have learned to make a distinction between "work" and "leisure": the former is what we have to do most of the time against our desire; the latter is what we like to do, although it is useless. We therefore feel bored and frustrated on our jobs, and guilty when we are at leisure. Among the consequences of such a state of affairs is the deep-seated alienation of workers in industrial nations (Kenniston, 1960; Ginzberg, 1971; Ford, 1969; Gooding, 1972; Terkel, 1974). This conflict cannot be dismissed as just a temporary result of affluence. Some writers seem to think that workers are dissatisfied only when their jobs are safe; during periods of scarcity or unemployment, people are glad enough to make a living

even if their jobs are dull and meaningless. It is more likely that workers threatened in their jobs will vent their frustration in even more destructive ways. Although German workers during the Great Depression did not agitate for job enrichment, they were glad to take a chance on conquering the world.

There is another serious problem with using extrinsic rewards as the only incentive for reaching desirable goals. Extrinsic rewards are by their nature either scarce or expensive to attain in terms of human energy. Money and the material possessions it can buy require the exploitation of natural resources and labor. If everything we do is done in order to get material rewards, we shall exhaust the planet and each other. Admittedly, people will always need possessions based on resources and physical energy. The waste begins when these are not used only to meet necessities but mainly as symbolic rewards to compensate people for the empty drudgery of life. At that point a vicious circle seems to begin; the more a person complies with extrinsically rewarded roles, the less he enjoys himself, and the more extrinsic rewards he needs. The only way to break the circle is by making the roles themselves more enjoyable; then the need for a *quid pro quo* is bound to decrease.

The same sort of argument holds for the other main class of extrinsic rewards, which includes power, prestige, and esteem. Although these are in many ways very different from each other, they are all based on an invidious comparison between persons. There is no question that people are different and that some deserve recognition above others in certain respects. But status differentials tend to follow a zero-sum pattern: the psychic benefits to those who get recognition are paid for by the decreased self-respect of those who do not.

Therefore, when a social system learns to rely exclusively on extrinsic rewards, it creates alienation among its members, and it places a drain on material resources which eventually may prove fatal. In the past, a more diversified set of incentives apparently reduced the monopoly of material goals; in many societies men seemed to enjoy thoroughly what they had to do to make a living (Arendt, 1958; Carpenter, 1970), or they

hoped to be rewarded with eternal bliss, or they found rewards in the approval of their peers (Weber, 1947; Polanyi, 1957). When these other reward systems are operative, demands on the ecology are less pressing.

The goal of this study was to begin exploring activities that appear to contain rewards within themselves, that do not rely on scarce material incentives—in other words, activities that are ecologically sound. For this reason, we started to look closely at such things as rock climbing, dance, chess, and basketball. Of course, while these activities may be intrinsically rewarding and hence ecologically beneficial, they are also unproductive. A society could not survive long if people were exclusively involved in playful pursuits. We assumed, however, that there is no unbridgeable gap between "work" and "leisure." Hence, by studying play one might learn how work can be made enjoyable, as in certain cases it clearly is. To make sure that the bridge between the two activities does exist, we included in our study members of a few occupations which one would expect to be enjoyable: composers of music, surgeons, and teachers. By understanding better what makes these leisure activities and satisfying jobs enjoyable, we hoped that we might also learn how to decrease dependence on extrinsic rewards in other areas of life as well.

Because modern psychology is concerned mainly with behavior and performance, rather than the reality of inner states of experience, psychologists largely ignore the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Because the only scientific way to control a person's behavior is to manipulate concrete rewards or punishments from outside the organism, most researchers focus on the motivating effects of extrinsic factors—pellets of food, M&M candies, tokens, or electric shocks. They often seem to forget that behavior appears closely dependent on external rewards simply because experimental conditions have necessitated the use of external rewards. Outside the laboratory people often have quite different reasons for acting. They may, for instance, suddenly find great value or meaning in a previously neutral stimulus simply because it is important for them to create value and meaning. The impor-