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## Children's Creation of Imaginary Worlds: Potentials and Practices: A Review Essay

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### Introduction

In this beautifully written book, Claire Golomb produces an eloquent account of three extraordinarily important practices that constitute an envisaging of children's pursuit and construction of imaginary worlds. Golomb, a noted psychologist and researcher, puts forth a compelling introductory text that works to provide parents, educators, and students of early childhood development with a persuasive and articulate rendering of the unwavering grasp that worldmaking has on young children, and the developmental trajectories, milestones, and slippages that compose the landscapes of their enduring quests for the alternative.

Reading this book is like listening to a gifted storyteller; Golomb's seamless writing style moves you in and out of theoretical terrains, but in ways that refrain from the imposing weight and limitations of an overly esoteric writing style. Amidst the rise and fall of Golomb's narrations there is a healthy balance of imagery and transcription that further emphasizes and carries forward the thoughts and problematics that are generated throughout the text.

For those familiar with Golomb's (1974, 1992, 2002) previous scholarship on the burgeoning intersections of child development, child art, and play, this text is both a unique blend of those endeavors, and a network of theoretical extractions that lays out in broader terms, an imaging of such junctures—offering both concreteness and ambiguity while giving rise to a provocative read. For those less familiar with Golomb's work, this text extends to its readers an accessibly rich introduction to the innumerable roles and values that child art, make-believe play, fantasy, and storytelling have in the child's cognitive, affective, and aesthetic development. Despite one's familiarity or prior engagement with such scholarship and thinking, this text presents a general and selective yet intricate portrayal of the essential qualities, questions, and issues concerning children's motivations toward creating imaginary worlds.

For the sake of clarity and cohesion, Golomb creates organizational borders by partitioning off chapters that are specific to child art, play, and the uncertain spaces between fantasy and fiction. The first chapter, *The Evolution of Child Art* depicts in general terms the emerging fascination young children have with art making. Through rather sweeping gestures, Golomb describes the child's ability to represent through their making—a world of astute complications that spread far beyond their formal aesthetic, articulating with each graphic manifestation an unstinting range of differentiations and potentials. Attending to matters of representation, the proliferation of early models, children's compositional facility, and the discursiveness of the sociocultural milieu, Golomb demonstrates how children sustain their interest in negotiating and inventing new worlds to be encountered, occupied, and unsettled, while upholding a clear focus for matters concerning artistic development.

Similar to those perspectives on child art and artistic development found in her previous book, *The Child's Creation of a Pictorial World* (2004), Golomb reiterates an understanding of artistic development in this text that is predicated upon children's problem-solving and emotionally driven desires when making sense of, but also orchestrating new and untold universes (p. 100). Rooted in the modernist queries and scholarship of Jonathan Fineberg (1997) and Rudolf Arnheim (1974), Golomb presents artistic development as a universal order through which children proceed in a natural fashion, passing through and across formally determined aesthetic "milestones" (p. 100) that are contingent upon children's access to a

range of visual models, and continually mediated by the partnerships they encounter and establish in their making practices.

As such, art making for Golomb is both a global occurrence that illuminates children's vigor and zeal to create and contest the particularities of an increasingly complex world, and a highly contextual enterprise—dependent upon the ongoing relation children have with others and objects. Golomb does well in attending to this contradictory yet necessary developmental quandary, negotiating with ease the intensity through which children construct and share with others, a mutual yet uniquely purposeful pictorial vocabulary.

The second chapter, *Play: A Wellspring of the Imagination* examines the often misunderstood juxtaposition of play and work, distinguishing from the onset that “play is the work of children” (Paley, 2004, p. 1), and occupying within the text a critical juncture—a space where children's artistic production, explorations of fantasy, and storytelling pivot upon an understanding of play that besets those conceptions which too often over-simplify and communicate through tones of reduction, what children and interested adults understand to be vital and arduous activities. This conception of play is accentuated by a description of children's desire to represent, and to build and inhabit imaginary and alternative worlds through a well crafted discussion of symbolic play, pretense play, make-believe play, imaginary friends, and the variables and variations that orchestrate the involvement of young and school aged children.

Whether it is through children's visual play, the earliest forms of pretense play, the development and enactment of a script, the misadventures had with an imaginary friend, or the many opportunities provided throughout adolescence and adulthood to perform and ratify an intended scenario, make-believe play is always infused (to a greater or less degree, of course), ensuring its prominence as one of the leading sources for social, affective, and cognitive growth. The centrality of play as a societal discourse enables both children and adults to test, manipulate, and re-configure complex and often controversial roles, identities, and possibilities.

As Golomb notes, pretense play is befitting to roles and themes that subtend and stretch the bounds of children's everyday realities, that put to work certain elements of fantasy and readily contain scenarios composed of improbable qualities and likenesses. But when carefully attended to, these intricate and expanding play-practices stand to increase verbalization and give rise to new expressions and forms of abstract thought. However, where the emphasis remains on preserving the continuity of more normative characteristics and features, support for pretense play will likely persist with inadequacy and limitations (p. 129).

The capacity, will, and support to “imagine and represent enables even the young child to go, temporarily, beyond the here-and-now and to enter the realm of the possible” (p. 133). It is this very notion of *moving beyond* a space-time of understandability and experiential fixity, to a space-time of possibility and indeterminacy that children’s artistic, conceptual, and imaginative play is to forever be unrelentingly entangled. It is here that play, in and through all of its incipient forms, “occupies a threshold between reality and unreality” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 1; citing Turner, 1969). Whether through the production of imagery or the construction and facilitation of elaborate scenes, children are *always* configuring new ways to understand their multiple and emerging realities—consuming, interpreting, reorganizing, and redistributing their many qualities, materials, forces, and dramas. Additionally, it is in the liminal space-time of play where identity is lifted from the tendrils of commonality, and instead becomes communicated as *the* subject of re-combination—lingering in the ambiguities of an unspecified becoming.

The question of the in-between remains a mainstay throughout the third chapter, which is appropriately titled, *Between Fantasy and Fiction*. Here, Golomb attends to the reality-unreality coupling that permeates children’s visual, conceptual, and make-believe play through an exploration and dialogue that centers upon children’s dreams, story telling, fairytales, and magic. Premised by the problematic of *when and how children understand their dreams*, Golomb takes up a query that for many years,

Has been a topic of great interest since it deals with the child’s ability to distinguish between mental and physical events, between the perception of a physically present object and the more ephemeral thoughts about real and imagined ones, including the reality status of dreams (p. 135).

Utilizing the neurophysiological work of Dement and Kleitman (1957) in conjunction with the scholarship of David Foulkes (1999), Golomb provides insight into the physiological and psychological complexities that often times exemplify children’s dreams—with particular attention given to the relationship between dreams and make-believe play. Here, Golomb refers extensively to the work of Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (1929, 1962), highlighting his conviction that dreams and make-believe play find resonance in one another, especially in terms of structure and content.

Traversing from the general to the particular, Golomb examines the mounting contingency of opacities concerning dreams; the problematic of remembering and making sense of one’s dreams and nightmares, the fluidity and interiority of consciousness that is associated with dreaming, the (mental) origin of dreams, the prodigious scope of issues that blanket them (i.e., matters of power, control, and desire), and the eventual shift that occurs when the forces of

representation so profusely exercised by children emerge from their private theatre in order to request an audience, or per the request of an audience. It is a constellation of curiosities that become even more convoluted as Golomb presses forward in questioning the structural, functional, and elemental continuities that play out between “daydreaming and waking fantasies” (p. 141).

It was here as well that I found the essential premise of the book to be ensnared by this evolving web of considerations, spinning a network of connections that I had not yet encountered. As Golomb observed, one can perceive a thread that runs from childhood through adolescence and to adulthood as well, a thread that in this particular instance traces the intensities that provide greater impetus to children’s representational prowess. Here, the command of children’s representational pursuits, or rather their desire to

Sustain the duality that underpins the relationship between imagination and reality...(fulfills) a vital function for the growing child’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, (and upholds) the promise for continued innovation and creative engagement (p. 175).

Despite the seductive writing style that Golomb employs, and the general yet inclusive analysis that she puts forth, this book is not without its limitations, nor does it evade concern. There is a tendency in the first chapter to attend to children’s artistic practices through a predominately visual lens, and in doing so, the author tends to privilege as well as position artistic play and the construction of knowledge within a rather restricted and unidirectional space. In the Epilogue of this book, Golomb writes, “images occupy a central position in drawing...while language, in the form of conversation and commentary, tends to play a subordinate role” (p. 174).

Golomb’s averseness to the vicissitudes of children’s artistic and conceptual practices, fundamentally limits our capacity to understand, appreciate, and attend with earnestness to children’s making and thinking. Furthermore, Golomb’s narrow treatment of children’s image production becomes problematic in that it directly contradicts the complexities of children’s play. It is for this reason that the relationship between the first chapter and those remaining seem to persist with hesitance, but what does come through rather strikingly is the exploration of *how* children learn about, use, and differentiate the many compositional elements in order to better construct, share, and expedite those graphic narratives which motivate and continually enlist their participation.

This point weaves itself in and through the remaining chapters, clarifying and ultimately enriching how, in developmental terms, children negotiate and make sense of the uncertainties

surrounding their creation of imaginary worlds. Overall, this book offers an important contribution to the field of child development, and provides parents, educators, students, and individuals whose interests circulate around issues of development, art, education, play, and the elusiveness of the imagination with an important and insightful read.

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### About the Author

Christopher M. Schulte is a Doctoral Candidate in Art Education at the Pennsylvania State University where he teaches undergraduate courses in art education and is the *atelierista* at the Gary Schultz Child Care Center at Hort Woods, located on the campus of Penn State University. Christopher has presented professional papers at regional, national, and international conferences and his scholarly writings can be found in national journals such as *Studies in Art Education* (forthcoming 2011) and *Visual Arts Research* (2013). His current research focuses on children's artistic and conceptual practices as Deleuzoguattarian embodiment. Christopher is the recipient of the Robert W. Graham Endowed Graduate Fellowship and the Dorothy Hughes-Young Endowed Scholarship in Art Education.

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