Conceptual Blending in Children's Games as a Model for Double-Scope Creativity and New Learning Opportunities

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Abstract

Fauconnier and Turner (2002, pp. 389-396) provide an overview of how blending affects the course of a human life, and more specifically, how young children are engaged in building complex blends in very early stages of their lives. Their detailed analysis shows that only after the young child is able to master culturally recognized blends will s/he be effectively 'living in the blend' and prove capable of further achieving other blends with more flexibility.

During early childhood, it appears that learning and mental development are intrinsically linked to our human ability to blend and deblend. Besides engaging in direct cultural blends, the young child can operate on conceptual blends that are not physically (biologically) given. For instance, this may happen when their imaginative processes are at work in a wide variety of games or fun activities, starting with Lego construction sets to fictive interactions with imaginary companions. In such games and activities, children manifest an extraordinary capacity for double-scope blending. Therefore, by playing games or getting involved in free activities, young children will bring to mastery mental integrations that are essential for their lives as adults.

In this light, the paper examines a set of children-designed games and activities that can all account for cases of fictive or potential reality. That is, the mental spaces created do not refer directly to entities in the outside world. I argue that an analysis of such fantasy mental spaces (with the tools of the mental space theory) can shed new light on learning and human creativity. While playing and blending mental spaces with their counterfactual counterparts, the young subject has to manipulate his/her 'split self' (Lakoff & Johnson 1999) or counterfactual self. With the knowledge of early evolution of conceptual blending in children's games, I propose that educators may apply the results in diverse areas of instruction and learning in order to better deal with the cognitive side of learning, and eventually come to terms with human creativity.

Keywords: blends, early childhood, mental development, children-designed games

Introduction

In the exceptional and emotionally charged story of his autobiographical memoir, *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie (2012) fights the crucial battle for writer's freedom and – at all costs – for freedom of speech. He instructs us that in an era when we are being pushed toward "ever-narrower definitions of ourselves" (p. 576), and hence toward narrower identities, literature ought to encourage a multiplicity of identities. The human self is heterogeneous rather than homogenous: "not one thing but many, multiple, fractured and contradictory" (p. 576). Writers and readers with broad identities will always find common ground with fictional characters and, most importantly, using that knowledge, they find points of identification with their fellow beings.

Rushdie's distinction between 'narrow' and 'broad' identities shows one of the most fundamental features of our inner lives: the distinction between the human Subject and our multiple selves. If the Subject makes what we uniquely are, the self is the sum total of our thoughts, experiences, and actions. In order to construct the sense of self, the human being changes social roles and becomes acquainted with multiple personal histories. The Subject or 'our essence' as the locus of human consciousness differs from the self in many different aspects. Admittedly, as Rushdie explains in his memoir, "the person you were for your parents was not the person you were with your children, your working self was other than your self as a lover, and depending on the time of day and your mood you might think of yourself as tall or skinny or unwell or a sports fan or conservative or fearful or hot" (p. 575-576). It is as if the 'home self', the 'lover self', the 'work self', or the 'moody self' were various facets of different individuals, but still they all define one unique body.

The split self

It seems that our multiple fractured selves are under the direct control of others and our constructed identity is the reflection of external realities. If this is true, we grow up learning to constantly adapt to stories created outside our self. More specifically, this is how we actually learn how to behave and act like others; which means that from the very beginning we start to experience ourselves as split identities. This is not to say, however, that infants are blank slates written on by others, since they are all born with a set of representational and perceptual capacities.
While we are generally perfectly willing to admit that parents or adults are the prime source for imitation, we have yet to address the question of imitation more pointedly

in order to show that learning by imitation largely defines our understanding of the split self. With this goal in focus, my thesis is that early imitation is a foundation for the emergence of more *selves* in the subject. I contend that it is precisely in early childhood forms of entertainment, as expressed in a host of imitation games (pretend play, make-believe, fantasy or imaginative play, etc.) that our sense of self begins to take a bifurcating shape. But the analysis will also go one step further in arguing that an examination of children's fantasies provides insight into the imitative mind.

Early imitation – a way to learning and communication

The recent interest of theorists in the theme of imitation from across disciplines has given rise to diverse lines of inquiry (see the edited collections by Nehaniv & Dautenhahn, 2007; Meltzoff & Prinz, 2002). In this study, the term 'imitation' is broadly used to refer to types of imitation used in pretend games in which young children reproduce behaviours that they have witnessed prior to the instance of reproduction.

Very early evidence of imitation can be found in infants. In a series of studies, Meltzoff and Moore (1994, 1998) demonstrate that imitation allows infants to determine the identity of others by replaying an imitative game they had played before with the same person. In time, this predominantly nonverbal communication realized in infant imitation develops into more mature and more abstract manifestations that will retain a sense of others. By imitating adults, infants of different ages may start to recognize what they share with other people and later this realization can open the door into the social world.

The interpersonal or social relationships with parents and household members from birth force us to continually evaluate our actions in the light of how others evaluate what we do and how others choose to perform the same actions. It is this interplay between personal experience and external influence that will shape our self as adults.

As the human brain develops, so does the mind– but this can only happen in the presence of others. Young children depend on others to such a great extent that their early experience of self mirrors a cluster of influences that have touched their lives until that moment. Therefore, juveniles are able to evolve through different social interactions and only through continually receiving socially relevant information. By imitating the social models around us, young children continually shape and reshape their selves in order to adjust to new changing contexts and novel roles.

However, compelling scientific evidence proves that the brain is primarily responsible for who we are. Any dysfunctions of the brain caused by accidents, drugs, or aging processes may temporarily or definitely alter our perceptions of the

self. The individual radically becomes a different person. But yet brains do not live in isolation – rather "each brain exists in an ocean of other brains that affect how it works" (Hood 2012, p.17). This ultimately indicates that the self is not only modelled by our brains but is equally influenced by the external world that assaults us at all times and sends signals that are to be interpreted and internalized by our brains. Most importantly, the development of our socially created self is a long modelling process that takes place throughout our lives and occupies the largest part of early childhood.

These last points highlight imitation as a social tool serving multiple purposes. At various levels, imitation can be used to initiate and maintain social interaction; it can be a mode of inter-personal communication. My paper also works on the same assumption that early imitation has a significant social function.

The split self engages in pretend play

In this section I propose that young children not only imitate to engage socially with others and to create their social selves, but imitation is seen as a cognitive ability to project oneself onto another or other entity in a hypothetical situation. Being able to simultaneously hold more than one identity in different mental spaces develops the concept of separate conceptual selves. I argue that pretend play or fantasy games can account for the cognitive function of imitation.
Why do children construct online fictions? How do minds construct and share such imaginative mental constructs? In addressing these questions, I will rely on G. Fauconnier's mental space theory (1994, 1997) that convincingly advances the view that humans are able to integrate two or more mental spaces as they speak, listen to a string of speech, or read texts. Mental spaces are partial mental constructs set up as the conceptualizer perceives, understands, remembers, or imagines a particular scenario. In short, mental space theory is a useful tool for analysing how individuals interpret sequences of spoken and written language.

In this light, the paper examines instances of mental space mapping in children's fantasy plays. In most pretend games, children share a communicative situation as the starting point and then project themselves onto another imaginary entity trying to imitate its behaviour and actions. As such, play companions inhabit the body of fictive participants in an imaginary scenario that may not correspond to the one in the real situation of communication. Importantly, the playfellows are physically present but the verbal interaction takes place strictly in the fantasy world. It is interesting to examine how such imaginary verbal interaction is represented in the minds of the participants. More specifically, how they can make mental contact with potential realities that would otherwise have a non-interactional relationship. The type of face-

to-face communication carried out during a fantasy play bears resemblance with what Pascual (2002, 2008) and Brandt (2008) call "fictive interaction". Such interactional structure does not mirror the observable communicative situation and "constitutes an invisible – although equally present and critical – channel of communication between fictive participants, who may or may not correspond to those in the actual situation of communication" (Pascual 2008, p. 81).

The examples selected for detailed analysis come from V. Gussin Paley's *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*. While playing, pre-school children are able to create with spontaneity highly imaginative stories and carry the plot and characters to places they have never visited. Let us look at the case of a child who engages in a fantasy play:

> Pretend I'm your baby dinosaur and I'm lost, and then you call me but I don't come because I have a different name now and then you hear a noise and you think it's a wolf but you can't call me because you don't know my name now. (p. 16)

As revealed in the example above, in this fascinating pretend game, the child is split into two individuals in the GAME space and the FANTASY mental space. It involves simultaneously the split of the self into two parts. The same individual in actuality is referred to both as a playmate in reality and as a 'baby dinosaur' in the fictional scenario. The child in the REALITY space is safe from any worries and dangers and begins to stage an exciting story with a real play companion. They seem to know each other well and both enjoy the suspense of the pretend play. On the other hand, his counterpart in fiction takes a new identity ('the baby dinosaur') and a new name, gets lost and is unable to help his friend. He speaks as if he were the metamorphosed baby dinosaur. In the scenario of the pretend game, there is no direct reference to the other playfellow, but one may assume he is also in an altered condition. In their fictitious setting, the wolf impersonating the danger cannot be stopped because the fictional counterparts, bearing small resemblance to the playfellows in reality, do not know each other by name. All these fictional elements in the pretend play do not directly mirror the world. The wolf and the increasing tension are only present in the game and the two playmates with their counterparts in fiction contradict what they experience in actuality. In brief, the world defined by the children's fantasy game not only splits the referents into two dissimilar parts but it also provides insight into the playmates' cognitive capacities for representing such imaginary worlds.

It seems, then, that fantasy play entails imagining a fictive identity and engaging in fictive interaction. In their imagined interaction, there are two metamorphosed interactants (the baby dinosaur and perhaps another animal) who engage in imaginary topics of conversation, but the speech and the bodies correspond to the

actual playmates. True, the fictive communication of the represented entities does not necessarily relate to the experiential domain but undeniably it has a physical grounding (the playing ground, the playmates, etc.). The child departs from the REALITY space or the BASE space to construct a potential or a hypothetical space, set up by the space builder *pretend*. The playfellows no longer talk about what they do in their actual world but what they *pretend* they share in their imaginary world. With respect to the previous factual space, the second mental space sets up a counterfactual scenario in an alternative situation, with characters behaving *as if* they were something else. In this hypothetical space, the fictional counterpart of the second companion hears a noise and interprets it as danger. He *thinks* it is a wolf, which partitions the discourse into a further BELIEVE space, *but* he can't call his fictional companion because he doesn't know his name. The conjunction *but* clearly shows the contrast between the need for help and the impossibility to ask for it.

For further analysis, let us look at another example of a pretend game:

> "Pretend I'm the good mother."
> "Is there a mean one?"
> "The step one? No, only one mother, the nice one."
> "Let's both be baby sisters and our nice mother isn't lost yet."
> "Was she lost or are we lost?"
> "Not yet. No one is lost. This is the part where we're still happy." (p.19)

As in the other fantasy game, the space builder 'pretend' represents an overt indicator that opens up a new virtual mental space. The dialogue script shifts focus to a space in which the fellow companions become 'baby sisters' watched by their 'nice mother' who has not been lost yet. The final scenario is set up gradually after the participants hesitantly evaluate the other options: who could be the 'good mother' and whether there is 'a step mother'. In this fictive address, the interactants also evaluate their new roles and, in this way, they can learn what they think of the individuals talked about in real situations of communication. This means that the underlying configuration of their fictive interaction bears the mark of the participants' social experience and of their exposure to similar situated exchanges. The *pretend* space builder not only requires the conceptualization of a hypothetical mental space but it also requires the integration of incompatible structure. Even though 'the baby sisters' know that they and their 'good mother' may be lost in the real story, they set up potential realities in which nobody is lost and time is halted to a never-ending happiness.

It is interesting to look at the following engaging fantasy play in which children rewrite the story of *The Little Red Riding Hood*:

> "You be the mother," she tells Cora. "You have to come with me in case there's a wolf."
> "First we see the hunter," Cora decides. "He already banged at the wolf."
> "But you didn't tell me don't talk to the wolf!"
> "No, see, this is the first real way it goes. The wolf sees the mother and so he runs away." (21)

Clearly, children enjoy such fantasy games for their entertainment value. But more significantly, nevertheless, they do not simply participate in the game with the purpose of enjoying the imagined stories as such: they play out concepts and beliefs from experience, animate entities, and present imaginary scenarios affectionately. The alternative framework of the story allows for complementary improvement of the original storyline: the bad wolf sees the mother and runs away. Interestingly, in their fictive interaction the fictional mother and girl incorporate conversational cues from the original story: 'But you didn't tell me don't talk to the wolf!'The speaker seems to suggest that they need to repeat exactly the lessons learned experientially or taken directly from the original story. In other words, the desire to imitate the behaviours and beliefs of the original scenario takes them back to the BASE space of actuality. However, the other communicative participant presents her suggestion to keep the virtual space because it seems safe and 'the first real way' for a turn of the story.

Blending and double-scope creativity in (pretend) games

The various case studies presented in the previous section give evidence of the fact that, when involved in fantasy games, participants set up mental spaces as imaginary scenarios, interconnect them, and modify them as discourse unfolds. On the other hand, this is not the whole story of the imitative mind. For instance, the sentence "pretend I'm your baby dinosaur and I'm lost..." requires not only the conceptualization of a hypothetical mental space, but it also requires the mapping of incompatible mental spaces. Even though in the BASE space the playmates are real individuals who feel safe from any trouble, they can still imagine themselves as non-human figures facing danger and risking their lives. The discovery that individuals are able to imagine such a situation contrary to facts with essential consequences for thinking led cognitive scientists G. Fauconnier and M. Turner (2002, 2006) (see also Turner 1996) to advance the theory of conceptual blending.
This pretend game is a double-scope network (Fauconnier and Turner 2002, p. 131-139) that has input spaces with clashing structures. There is disanalogy between the safe playmate in the BASE space and the lost baby dinosaur in the second input. Further, in the space of reality both companions know each other well whereas in the counterfactual space there is no communication. If the first input is free of danger,

the presence of the wolf in the second input emphasises the clashing differences. But the inputs are not simply juxtaposed. The imagined situation in which the second playmate cannot call for help and thus may be caught by the wolf is understood as the blended space.

Evidence of blending or conceptual integration can be found in other similarly engaging children's activity. For instance, when a two-year-old picks up a banana and talks into it as if it were a mobile phone, s/he proves to have collected important pieces of cultural information to be later used for making other useful connections. With the highly imaginative Lego construction sets, the child can play, build and rebuild. The player constructs towers, castle, cars, or other miniature objects replicating physical objects from the surrounding reality. When the building is finished, players may want to change pieces, move one tower to another place, or make the castle taller; all these additions are only limited by the physical characteristics of the building blocks that cannot be divided or changed into a different size or shape. Gravity may sometimes spoil the fun. Otherwise, no one really instructs children on such physical constraints but they will know quite precisely what rules satisfy their constructions.

Endowed with the capacity for integration, the child will take that information from the surrounding cultural stimuli and use that knowledge in their play. The fact that they may have already experienced boat trips and bridge crossings, they may have seen pictures of towered castles, or they may have witnessed different actions and behaviour gives them enough stimuli to reproduce them out of Lego sets. Such construction games are much more than simply imaginative imitation games: they are useful applications of early forms of human imagination. Building and rebuilding construction sets creatively and resourcefully reflects the making and unmaking of conceptual integration networks.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I have argued that early imitation constitutes a form of social engagement that also helps infants develop the concepts of self and others. Analysis suggested that through multiple forms of imitation, the self is largely shaped by people around us. It is through imitation that we experience ourselves as split. I further proposed that every sort of fantasy game that children play can express a sense of others and reveal the split in the self. The manifestations of imitation in fantasy or pretend games may be concerned with the social function of imitation, but most importantly, with how the self and the other are coded in the minds. More generally, children engage in fantasy games for their immensely entertaining value but, at the same time, they begin to act out theatrically on the stage of their creative

minds. By projecting themselves onto someone else or something else, the self of the young individual takes a bifurcating shape that allows them to develop broad identities. Such a fundamental cognitive activity involving the dramatization of the self helps us later understand such puzzling language: "If I were you, I'd hate me too" (Johnson & Lakoff 1999, p. 281). If fantasy games seem to impact upon the individual's identity, they can be used as valuable teaching tools.

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