

Integral Play: An Exploration of Adult Transformation

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Introduction

Despite many attempts to understand its nature and function, the play concept remains as elusive today as it was 2500 years ago when pre-rational Dionysian play began to give way to rational Apollonian play.¹ Play's domain is by nature paradoxical. Still, much of the confusion and ambiguity around play is less a function of its inherent nature than it is a failure to map its forms in a way that provides a coherent sense of the domains and levels of experience they occupy. With an Integral map we have an opportunity to gain an understanding of the depth and complexity of play that has eluded previous attempts.

In this article, we organize play's myriad modes within an Integral model, shedding light on the dimensions of the whole playground. We then offer a developmental model for adult play that provides an understanding of the unfolding complexity of play in light of the evolution of consciousness. And finally, we show how play is not only an epiphenomenon, but also an instigator of transformation, exploring the play forms most conducive to growth.

We do not claim that the Integral perspective has ultimate legitimacy. Every approach is inherently limited in light of the infinite complexity and variability—dare we say—the *play* of reality itself. We do think, however, that the Integral model currently provides the most comprehensive and nuanced framework available with which to understand play and its transformative potential. Our hope is that instead of pressing play into the service of our Integral worldview we might use this perspective in the service of

play, enhancing, not limiting our appreciation of its variable, elusive, and paradoxical nature.

The Integral Model

We borrow the term “Integral” from the contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber.² In a world characterized by disciplinary turf wars and clashes between traditional, modern, and postmodern perspectives, Wilber has written extensively on the value of, and need for, an Integral approach and has played an important role in establishing *Integral Theory*, a transdisciplinary framework for today’s complex world.³ As a result of its applicability across disciplines, Integral Theory has received a wide embrace from individuals associated with a variety of fields: art, business, ecology, medicine, finance, consciousness studies, religion, correctional education, criminology, education, psychology, healthcare, nursing, politics, sexuality and gender studies, social service, future studies, and sustainability to name a few.⁴

Our Integral exploration of play begins with a clear map of the playground that locates play forms and their corresponding worldviews and developmental stages in relationship to each other. We recognize the vast and multiple ways play manifests within and between people, as the horizontal forms of play, and the diverse worldviews out of which we engage these forms as the vertical forms.

There are five elements that comprise an Integral approach: *quadrants*, *levels*, *lines*, *states*, and *types*. These five components, referred to by the acronym AQAL (short for “all-quadrants, all-levels”), represent the intrinsic perspectives that occur at all scales and in all contexts. By including these basic elements an Integral practitioner can be sure

that they are covering all the facets, dimensions, and aspects of any phenomena. There is no ontological or epistemological priority assigned to any of the aspects, because each aspect co-arises with every other in the seamless fabric of reality in every moment.

- **Quadrants** refer to the basic perspectives we can take on reality. There is, at any given moment, always an individual and a collective dimension. Within each of these dimensions, there is also both an interior and an exterior point of view. These four domains—the interior and exterior of individuals and collectives—are also described as the domains of; 1) experience (individual-interior); 2) culture (collective-interior); 3) behavior (individual-exterior), and; 4) systems (collective-exterior). The remaining four elements of the Integral model all arise within these four basic perspectives. The figure below shows how each quadrant represents a different perspective (see Figure 1 below).

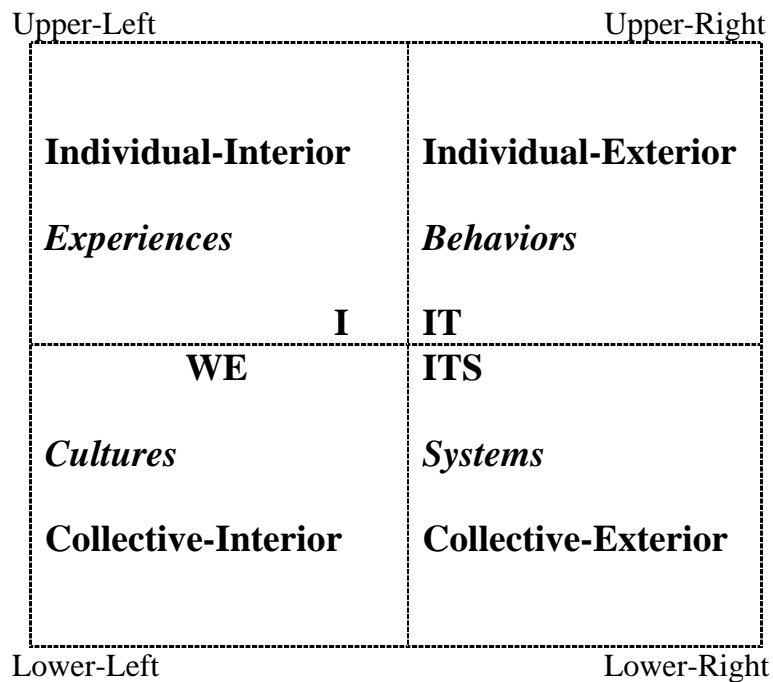


Figure 1: The Four Quadrants

- **Levels** are another way to describe the occurrence of complexity. For example, in the individual-exterior quadrant of behavior we witness the physical complexity of any given individual organism. A dog is more complex and thus located at a higher level than an amoeba.⁵

- **Lines** of development are another way to describe the distinct capacities that develop through levels. For example, in the individual-interior quadrant of experience, the capacities or lines that develop include, but are not limited to, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and moral capacities.

- **States** are the temporary occurrence of any aspect of reality. For example, stormy weather is a state that arises in the collective-exterior quadrant of systems, while euphoria is a state that occurs in the individual-interior quadrant.

- **Types** are the variety of styles that arise in various domains. An example would be a particular kind of religious worldview, like Protestant, in the collective-interior quadrant of culture or the body type of an endomorphic dwarf in the individual-exterior.

Each of these five elements can easily be understood in the context of play.⁶ The **quadrants** represent the irreducible dimensions of play: how we experience play, what actions are part of the play, the meaning of the play, and the rules involved in play. As we explore in detail below, these quadrants, or perspectives are always present in any play activity.

A specific play form also reflects the **Level** of psychological and cultural development of the players—through its inclusivity, its intention, and the sense of self of the players involved. The level of the play determines many of its features (competitive vs. cooperative games) as well as its appeal and accessibility to individuals and cultures.

Lines of psychological development such as cognitive, emotional, interpersonal capacity, moral judgment, and kinesthetic sense all have an important bearing on the way people play and the forms they choose. For instance, improvising musically requires and contributes to the development of musical ability.

States of consciousness are one of the central features and attractions of play. These can range from peak experiences and spiritual openings, to cathartic discharges of energy and adrenaline rushes. We play for the fun of it, to unwind, lift our mood, or get energized! Many theorists define play as being intrinsically motivated because of these

powerful, pleasurable play states. It is important to note that states are distinct from levels in that the same state may be experienced but that state will be interpreted differently from different levels of development.

Finally, whether we use the astrological archetypes, The Myers Briggs personality profile, or the Enneagram system, an understanding of personality **types** sheds light on how personal preferences for different play forms may be based on different personality structures—or, more generally, how we can engage in the same play from different aspects of our personality, (i.e. masculine or feminine, follower or leader).

Using the Integral model and its five elements provides a comprehensive framework for organizing the multidimensional nature of play in the self, the other, and the world. With an Integral compass in hand, we can now explore the playground and gain a better understanding of play's transformative potential, mapping play using the first three of the five elements of the Integral model: the quadrants, levels, and lines of development. Due to space limitations, we focus on the aspects of the Integral model that will shed the most light on play as a vehicle for transformation. The quadrants, levels, and lines have the most general bearing on our exploration of play's transformative potential.

The Four Corners of the Playground

In the context of play, the four quadrants highlight how individuals experience play, what behaviors are involved in the particular play form, the various cultural meanings associated with and created through the play as well as the various systems and rules that define the play. We will call these four corners or essential features of the

playground *the experience of play, the act of play, the meaning of play, and the rules of play* (see Figure 2).

- *The Experience of Play*: This is the subjective dimension of the players. It includes the impulses, feelings, and images that arise constituting the experiences generated by play; from ecstatic, non-ordinary states of consciousness to the nausea, dizziness and euphoria of vertiginous play. The research of Mihalyi Csiczentmihalyi helps identify the conditions for what he calls the Flow state which is often associated with play (1990). Every phenomenological experience, intention, attitude, and response to the play constitutes the Experience of Play.

- *The Act of Play*: This is the objective or behavioral dimensions that occur within the individual player including the actions involved in play. Are people running and jumping or sitting and thinking? What physical positions are they in and how are they interacting? Are they sweating, breathing hard, laughing, and releasing hormones? All physical phenomena associated with the play form, including both the paraphernalia of play (toys, equipment, playground) or the physiology and action of the player constitute the Act of Play.

- *The Meaning of Play*: This is the intersubjective or cultural dimension of play. Regardless of whether you are playing by yourself or with others, play takes place within a cultural context. This context is informed by overlapping layers of mutual understanding and resonance, language, and meaning. Play often involves various symbols, stories, norms, and ethics. These are all aspects of its intersubjectivity. In addition, play often involves the interaction of various perspectives. As a result, it is not uncommon for either greater emotional bonds and affiliation to grow or conflicts and

misunderstandings to occur. All interactions, whether they assert the needs of the individual or enhance the cohesion of the group are part of the meaning of play.

- *The Rules of Play*: This is the interobjective or systems dimension of the play. This aspect of play focuses on the way parts of the play fit together to create the play whole. Play is held together by various rules or “grammar” of interaction within the play space. Some play practices have very elaborate rules and others only one or two guidelines. Some play plays with the rules of the game, but even this form of trickster play abides by its own set of rules, which in turn are subject to further play. There are also various ways in which ecological and social systems can either support or constrict the play. All structures that define, underlie, support, or inhibit play belong to the Rules of Play.

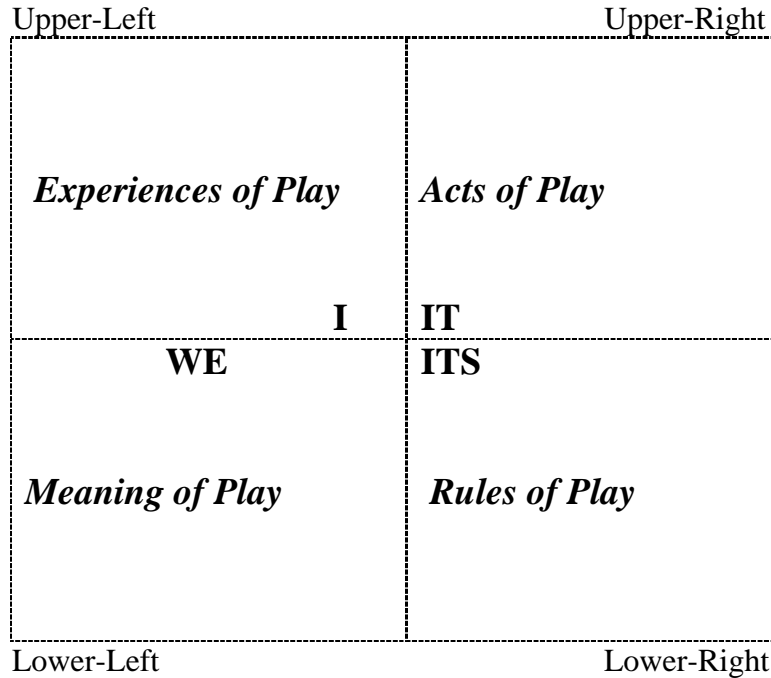


Figure 2: The Four Quadrants of Play

These four dimensions co-arise and are always present in any form of play. For a simple example, imagine a group of friends playing poker. Each person is having an experience while playing (Upper-Left quadrant), which might include anxiety, intuition, bluffing, and a wide range of somatic impulses. They are behaving (Upper-Right quadrant) in certain ways: taking turns, looking at their cards, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, etc. Their game is taking place in the context of the larger culture (Lower-Left quadrant) within which poker has a particular history, various symbols, stories constituting a distinct mythos, and association with certain types of people. In addition, this group of friends has formed their own subculture. They have played together every Friday night for the past ten years. There are intersubjective dynamics and specific meanings that have been established over time between them: Bob always brings the beer, Larry always has a joke which Al always thinks is funny and Joe has learned how to

read Bob’s hand. They experience mutual understanding (mostly about women) and misunderstandings (mostly about women) and have established certain norms. Finally, there are systems (Lower-Right quadrant) that govern their play including the rules for poker and the events and institutions that make up the backdrop of their lives: the political climate, their educational status, their jobs, etc. As this simple example illustrates, the quadrants highlight, contain, and connect the myriad aspects of play (see Figure 3 below).

Upper-Left	Upper-Right
<p><i>The Experience of Play</i></p> <p>Somatic Emotional Psychological Phenomenological Aesthetics Spiritual</p>	<p><i>The Behavior of Play</i></p> <p>Biological Scientific Medical Behavioral Physiological</p>
<p><i>The Meaning of Play</i></p> <p>Cultural Worldviews Philosophical Religious Esoteric Archetypal</p>	<p><i>The Systems of Play</i></p> <p>Evolutionary Historical Ecological Geographical Social Political Economic Educational Linguistic</p>
Lower-Left	Lower-Right

Figure 3: Additional Aspects of Play

While any play form always involves these four intrinsic perspectives simultaneously, certain forms tend to emphasize, rely on, or be associated with one quadrant more than others. For example, a name game used as an ice-breaker in a newly

formed group has a predominant intersubjective dimension—helping to make connections and form a feeling of cohesion in the group, while downhill skiing has primarily a behavioral dimension, even though it is pursued for the experience (see figure 4 below).

Upper-Left	Upper-Right
<p><i>Experiential Play Practices</i></p> <p>Make believe Thought experiments Writing poetry, literature or music Making art Koans and riddles Paradox Word games</p>	<p><i>Behavioral Play Practices</i></p> <p>Hobbies/collecting etc. Crafts Gambling Contest (with oneself) Sport Hunting/Fishing Ropes courses Juggling, skateboarding, extreme sports, etc.</p>
<p><i>Cultural Play Practices</i></p> <p>Festivals & Ritual Cooperative games Initiations Concerts, exhibits Performances Community theater</p>	<p><i>Social Play Practices</i></p> <p>Team sports Card and board games Businessperformance incentives Political power play Online Computer Games Stock Market</p>
Lower-Left	Lower-Right

Figure 4: Forms of Play within the Quadrants

This map is by no means comprehensive. However, it does show how organizing play forms according to their perspective can provide a better view of the ways play can enhance each domain and the impact each domain has on play. We can use this model to understand the relationship between categories offered by different play theorists as well.

We use the work of philosopher Roger Caillois and contemporary theorist Brian Sutton-Smith. Caillois provided a taxonomy of play consisting of four categories: 1) Mimesis or simulation and make believe play; 2) *Ilinx* or vertiginous games; 3) *Alea* or games of chance, and; 4) *Agon* or competitive games. Each of these belongs in a different quadrant (Caillois, 1961, p.19). In exploring the ambiguous relationship between play theories, Brian Sutton-Smith listed what he called the various “rhetorics” associated with different play theories. These include the rhetoric of *play as power*, *play as self*, *play as identity*, *play as frivolous*, *play as progress*, *play as imagination*, and *play as fate* (Sutton-Smith, 1998).

Using the quadrants we can understand the horizontal relationship between Sutton-Smith’s rhetorics and Caillois’ categories (see figure 5 below).⁷

Upper-Left	Upper-Right
<p><i>Experiential Play Practices</i> Caillois Mimesis (make believe)</p> <p>Sutton-Smith Play as Self (internal) Play as Imagination</p>	<p><i>Behavioral Play Practices</i> Caillois Ilinx (vertiginous)</p> <p>Sutton-Smith Play as Progress Play as Self (extreme sports)</p>
<p><i>Cultural Play Practices</i> Caillois Alea (games of chance)</p> <p>Sutton-Smith Play as Identity Play as Fate</p>	<p><i>Social Play Practices</i> Caillois Agon (competitive games)</p> <p>Sutton-Smith Play as Power Play as Frivolity</p>
Lower-Left	Lower-Right

Figure 5: Caillois' forms and Sutton-Smith's rhetorics within the quadrants

Here we can see that Caillois' forms and Sutton-Smith's rhetorics reflect an emphasis on different dimensions of reality. But with only horizontal categories, it's still impossible to see their relationship to the evolution of consciousness. While we need a quadrant analysis to understand the domain we are playing in, with *merely* a quadrant analysis the playground remains flat. Using the quadrants alone, there is no way of telling whether the player is a crook or Gandhi. In order to tell whether and how play transforms consciousness we need to add developmental dimensions to our map.

Developmental Levels of Play

Piaget was the first to identify the cognitive structures underlying each stage of development. He believed, however, that children do not develop new cognitive structures in play, but merely incorporate new experiences into what they already know (Piaget, 1951). Child psychologists and play theorists have been contesting this claim ever since (Winnicott, 1971; Sutton-Smith, 1982).

While Piaget's developmental stages are also useful for understanding adult development, we have found almost no studies or literature directly exploring the role of play in adult development, especially in the levels of development beyond formal operations.⁸ But we do know that development does not stop at adulthood. Adults develop through stages of consciousness and, as with childhood, each stage can be associated with different forms of play. The adult's developmental level determines what kind of play is accessible and attractive to her.

Developmental stages are defined by the worldview each inhabits. We can begin to understand the worlds and worldviews associated with specific play modes by revisiting Sutton-Smith's rhetorics. To understand this logic, we start with the developmental scheme provided by the Integral model. The model is comprised of *at least* eight basic levels, which, for our purposes, we will call the Play Selves. Each Play Self expresses itself in distinct ways and can be described in terms of the center and boundary of its identity. Beginning at an egocentric level, a play self develops through ethnocentric, worldcentric, cosmocentric and theocentric modes.⁹ While there is a developmental relationship between each of the worldviews, albeit one that involves a complex holarchical envelopment, it is not a simple progressive, linear, or hierarchical relationship. These complex issues will not be fully explored in this article.¹⁰ Toward our purpose of understanding the developmental impact of play, we will explain each level, illustrate its topographical contours, and describe the play forms that relate to it.

The Eight Play Selves are based on Susanne Cook-Greuter's and William Torbert's full spectrum Action-Inquiry research on postautonomous ego development.¹¹ Their research represents the most sophisticated and extensive full-spectrum (prepersonal, personal, post-personal, and post-postpersonal) research available. It is worth noting that their levels closely coincide with the levels of Beck and Cowan's Spiral Dynamics (SD) model of value systems (1996).¹² Each play self has a unique way of relating to itself, other playmates, and the playground. In brief:¹³

The impulsive self is a Magical Player who connects with the cosmos by balancing dichotomous forces such as good and evil. They have a strong concern for creating safety

and satisfying basic needs. The Magical Player has a sense of unlimited power combined with superstitious and magical notions. Their play is often highly repetitive. They view other people primarily as a source of self-gratification and feel confused and anxious by the complexity of the world.

The self-protective self is an Aggressive Player who is self-serving. Their play often takes the form of heroic acts. They identify the self in terms of its will, ideas, and wishes. Self-preservation is central. They project all their feelings and rarely self-reflect. They think globally with many judgments and simple ideas. They see other people as competitors for space, goods, and dominance and have little capacity for insight into self and others. They often cross other's boundaries in a crusade of low trust and hyper-vigilance. They experience the world as a dangerous place filled with perilous risk.

The conformist self is an Ordered Player who is rule-oriented and concerned with group membership. They define themselves through others. They have no stable and clear boundaries between the self and the group. Projection and introjection are their common defenses. They suppress negative feelings and overemphasize positive ones. They have a strong need to be accepted and to reject those who do not conform to the group. They view their world through a concrete-literal lens.

The conscientious self is a Status Player who is defined by their orientation toward linear causality, objective (third-person) thinking, and a newly emerging separate self-identity, which lends itself to competition for status. The self has greater independence and

confidence. They have an interest in their emotional life, though rationality is emphasized. They associate with others with similar goals and desires in life. They are drawn to achievement and accomplishing goals by being concise, efficient, and effective. They have a genuine interest in others, independent of their own needs and values. The world is experienced as predictable and measurable.

- *The individualistic self is a Sensitive Player* who emphasizes connectivity between people especially by sharing experiences, acknowledging contextual aspects of play (e.g., gender, class, race), and systemic dynamics of reality. They are aware of the observer and multiple viewpoints. They abandon objectivity and logic in favor of more holistic and organismic approaches. They value feelings and express them. They are aware of the conditioning dynamics of culture and context. They have the capacity to empathize with others and take their perspective. They understand their world is filled with diverse perspectives and competing truth claims.

- *The autonomous self is a Complex Player* who welcomes chaos and multiple variables in service of self-development. The Complex Player understands the self as embedded in many contexts and dimensions. They accept many aspects of self through a complex psychology that integrates shadow material. They tolerate others in spite of their negative traits and differences of opinions or values. They experience their world as multidimensional with overlapping contexts and systems.

- *The integrated self is a Dynamic Player* who integrates multimodal and multidimensional elements across contexts in service of humanity. They are aware of the subtle ways the ego filters experience. The Dynamic Player recognizes paradox and the limits of “mapping.” They desire to work through their own limits and blind spots and increase their capacity to witness themselves in the moment. They understand others in developmental terms and encounter them without judgment. They have a profound understanding of other’s complex and dynamic personalities. They experience the world as a place full of potential and paradox.

- *The construct-aware and ego-aware selves are combined as an Unitive Player* who is a transparent manifestation of Being, completely spontaneous and open. They have stable access to transpersonal realities such as the capacity to witness all experience and keep all boundaries open. They view others as manifestations of Being. They experience the world as an immanent expression of timeless Spirit (see Figure 5 below).

Center of Identity	Play Selves	Style of Play	Examples	Worldview/ Cook-Greuter /Piaget
Theo- centric	Unitive Player Play as lila	Spontaneous, witnessing, highly creative, original, and open.	Identification with the play of the world. Improvisation at psycho-spiritual levels - Crazy wisdom, Yogic Play,	Trans- Personal Ego- & Const.- aware
Cosmo- centric	Dynamic Player Play as transformative	Multimodal and multi- dimensional	Improvisation with transformation. Meditation, holotropic breathwork, Koans, inquiry	Post-post- Personal Integrated
World- centric	Complex Player Play as chaos	Fast and unpredictable	Improvisation with the world, improvisational movement and theater, multidimensional simulations, virtual reality	Post- Personal Autonomous
World- centric	Sensitive Player Play as cooperation	Connecting and sharing	Name games, ropes courses, New Games, team building exercises,	Post- personal Individualistic
Socio- centric	Status Player Play as competition	Winning and losing	Video games, gambling, poker, competitive sports, games at fairs and carnivals, Ropes courses (transitional)	Personal Conscientious Piaget: Form- Op Personal
Ethno- centric	Ordered Player Play as structure	Following the rules	Board games, collecting things, hobbies, card games, intellectual games. Mensa.	Conformist Piaget: Con-Op Pre-personal
Ego-centric	Aggressive Player Play as conquest	Acts of heroism	Survivor, war games, chicken, drinking games, boxing/fights	Self-protective Piaget: Pre-op Pre-personal
Ego-centric	Magical Player Play as connection to cosmos	Balancing good and evil	Dungeons and Dragons, Fantasy games, Divination: Runes, Tarot, magic tricks, Charms, rituals	Impulsive Piaget: Sensorimotor

Figure 5: The Eight Play Selves

Each Play Self becomes capable of and attracted to qualitatively different types of play. Its worldview has a language of its own and defines what is and is not play differently. For example, an Ordered Player enjoys playing when the rules are clear and people follow them. Whereas, a Sensitive Player finds more value in play that connects people regardless of whether the rules are well-defined or obeyed.

It's important to recognize that each play form does not strictly correlate with a particular worldview, but can be played from within a wide range of perspectives. The Dalai Lama might enjoy a game of poker as much as Mike Tyson, but from within a different worldview. But, generally speaking, each developmental stage really only deeply enjoys the forms of play that match their own and prior stages of development. In other words, each developmental stage transcends and includes the play forms of the prior ones. Playing games that emerge out of stages far more developed than our own simply has no appeal. We can't imagine why anybody would enjoy them. A Status Player is as interested in play that helps liberate all beings as a Magical Player is in playing the stock market.

The levels of development also reflect different centers of concern and identity. Each establishes the motivation, intention, and scope of engagement (i.e. with whom, for what, and why we are playing). In egocentric play, which includes the Magical and Aggressive Player, the player considers the other an object and plays only for the benefit of him/herself. In ethnocentric play, which includes Ordered Play, the player plays to be part of the group and to strengthen the bonds of community. In the next stage, sociocentric play which includes Status Play, the player plays to win, whether for him/herself or for a larger affiliation such as one's company or country. In worldcentric

play, which includes the Sensitive and Complex Players, play occurs in service, whether directly or indirectly, to humanity and the inclusion of the diversity of play members. In cosmocentric play, which includes the Dynamic Players, people play to transform themselves in service of self, other, and world. In theocentric play, Unitive Players play with and for the purpose of liberating all beings.

As the figure illustrates, specific play forms tend to reinforce, reflect, and support specific worldviews. Ordered Players are at the concrete operational stage of cognition and therefore enjoy board games because they appreciate that all players are held accountable to the same rules. Status Players, at the formal operations level of cognition, prefer more individualistic or abstract play like rock climbing or entrepreneurial business ventures. They like play that allows them to express, assert, and be rewarded for their individuality.

Since anybody can engage in the same activity but for very different reasons and from very different perspectives, it is not uncommon for players in the same game to represent a broad range of developmental levels. As a result, they may have different needs, goals, and views of their mutual play. If a Status Player and a Sensitive Player are both playing a game of lawn darts the former will probably be striving to win while the latter will probably be seeking connection. This might work as long as the Status Player wins, but even so, the difference in worldviews can lead to conflicts and/or misunderstandings, should the Status Player lose too often and/or the Sensitive Player's need for connection remain unsatisfied.

The quality, subtlety, and nature of the same play form may also change when engaged from different developmental stages. For example, from the perspective of

the Aggressive Player, sexual play is an act of domination and control. For the Sensitive Player, it is an act of intimacy. For the Unitive Player, it is an act of communion with the divine. As development increases, sensitivity increases in the physical, emotional, and spiritual body, making deeper communion possible. Sex can be a pre-personal, personal, and a transpersonal play encounter depending on the level of development of the players.¹⁴

As we see in the diagram, Piaget's stages of play help describe the cognitive development of the first four Play Selves with Magical and Aggressive Play correlating with the preoperational stage, Ordered Play with the concrete operational stage, and Status Play with the formal operational stage. These first four stages make it possible to describe and understand 85% of the human population, which exists within pre-personal and personal modes of being (Cook-Greuter, 2002). However, that leaves out the 15% who are manifesting post-personal and trans-personal forms and perspectives of play. These play forms and perspectives are at the leading edge of our evolutionary potential and must be included in any full topography of play, which is why Cook-Greuter's developmental research is so helpful to an Integral approach to play.

Sutton-Smith's work comes closer than any other play theorist's in recognizing the full spectrum of play, though he limits his interpretation to include only the ancient (pre-personal) and modern (personal) stages of development. What is striking to us about this cartography is that it correlates very strongly with an understanding of ego development in individuals and worldview development in cultures and communities (see below).

Yet Sutton-Smith appears to be unaware that his framework provides suggestive evidence for the evolutionary unfolding of play perspectives. So, while a strict interpretation through a developmental lens of Sutton-Smith's would not be justified, given that he is using his categories in a much looser sense, his work does bring us closer to understanding the relationship between individual and collective development in the context of play forms and theories. A developmental perspective not only shows a vertical relationship between these seven worldviews, but also reveals the logic that connects them. We expand the interpretation of some of the rhetorics to reflect their presence in post-personal transpersonal stages of development and their correlations with the Play Selves (see Figure 6 below).

Developmental stage	Play Rhetoric	Play Self
Transpersonal	Play as frivolity	Unitive Player Dynamic Player
Post-personal	Play as <u>S</u> elf Play as imagination	Complex Player Sensitive Player
Personal	Play as self & Play as progress Play as identity	Status Player Ordered Player
Pre-personal	Play as power Play as fate	Aggressive Player Magical Player

Figure 6: Play Rhetorics in the Developmental Model

The rhetoric of *play as fate*, *power*, and some aspects of *play as identity*, and *frivolity* all fit within the pre-personal worldview. Play as identity can be as true for a mythic culture centered around festivals and rituals as it is in a highly bureaucratic culture centered around loyalty to the firm and its membership in the country club, regular golfing, and barbeque parties, etc. Play as frivolity is really the play of the

outsider, the children, crazy people, elderly, or marginalized racial groups at any developmental stage. The rhetoric of *play as self* and *play as progress* as well as aspects of *play as identity* primarily express the personal worldview, while some aspects of the *play of imagination* and again *frivolity* express post-personal worldviews. In a post-personal expression of *play as imagination*, the identity is expanded through the imagination. We imagine playing with creatures very different from ourselves, whether they are children of future generations or non-human species.¹⁵ The *play of Self* (capital “S”) (to expand Sutton-Smith’s original category), is another post-personal worldview that deliberately expands the sense of identity and includes meditation, breathwork, inquiry or psychotropic drug use, to name a few. Aspects of Sutton-Smith’s rhetoric of frivolity reaches transpersonal dimensions in its ability to play with any rules of the game, including those of rational discourse or even, ultimately, physics. The remarkable correlations between the play rhetorics and the Play Selves serve to highlight that Sutton-Smith’s work has an implicit developmental dimension.

The Dignity and the Disaster

It is important to realize that even though each stage represents an increase in consciousness, each play self can have both a healthy and an unhealthy expression. With development comes power and the potential to use it for the benefit or the detriment of ongoing play. While the dignity can be greater for each stage, so can the disaster. We do not develop in linear progression equally through all lines of development (as we will discuss below). Some lines develop more quickly than others and provide resources that can be co-opted by less developed aspects of the self. Increasing capacities for complex

play brings mastery over greater dimensions of experience and behavior. We can use this mastery in the service of greater play for all or it can supply the narcissistic needs of a less developed or ego-centric aspect of the self. For example, the shadow of Sensitive Play is its intolerance toward people who do not like to bond through play. There is arguably less virtue in the disaster of this more developed expression than in the dignity of the less developed Status Player who encourages an individual to trust herself on a ropes course.

The Play Self is in its dignity when the play serves the freedom and increasing potential for play and playfulness. The disaster of each play self occurs when the expanded play sphere is brought into the service of the ego or ethno-centered need. An activity stops being play when it loses either its voluntary nature either for the player (through compulsion, habit, or unconsciousness), or for the participants (when they become objects of derision). In its dignity, a play self plays with the world as a subject, while in its disaster it plays with the world as an object (see Figure 7 below)

Play Selves	Disaster
Unitive Player	Manipulation of subtle energies, and people's spiritual longings for personal gain
Dynamic Player	Manipulation of the complexity of the situation for personal gain
Complex Player	Using awareness of others' weakness against them.
Sensitive Player	Intolerance of lack of participation
Status Player	Being deceptive, opportunistic, manipulating others for their own gain
Ordered Player	Rigidity, exclusivity, intolerance of individuality
Aggressive Player	Cruelty, incapacity for empathy
Magical Player	Unnecessarily suspicious

Figure 7: The Disasters of Play Selves

All eight of the Play Selves have strengths and weaknesses. They all have an appropriate Play ethos within their worldview and the capacity to be unplayful. Making the distinction between the “dignity and disaster” of each Play Self can provide a nuanced framework for analyzing play.

As we have already seen, play possibilities develop along at least two different axes. Horizontal play broadens the range or diversity of play forms, while vertical play increases the complexity. Horizontal play forms may generate skills, discovery, art, humor, or simply provide relief and release, but they do so from within the same level of consciousness, maintaining and broadening rather than deepening the players' range of movement. Vertical play, on the other hand, transforms the player, the

playmate, and the playground by widening the identity and sensitivity of the self and community.

Each stage represents new degrees of freedom to play in an expanded playground, having “cast off” the constraints of the prior level. The more we develop, the more we open to and identify with the deep play that is at the core of reality. As the player evolves, facets of the self which were once suppressed, unconscious, or latent, blossom into play, increasingly integrating the whole self and the whole the world. Our participation in the world is a function of our freedom, which is the same as our capacity to play. As we develop we can engage more (play)fully, joyfully, and effectively in the world. The playground grows both wider and deeper and the range of movement, interest, and capacity to respond creatively, that is, playfully, increases. Identified with an egoic self, we play to increase possibilities only for ourselves, but when identified with the larger life our play increases the possibilities for all of life, until the self and all of existence converge in the ecstatic play of evolution itself.

As the play evolves, an important distinction emerges between what philosopher James Carse calls finite and infinite play (1986). In finite play, the rules are rigid, not everybody plays, and the purpose of the play is to win. In infinite play, the rules are flexible, everybody is included and the purpose is to continue the play. Development can be seen as the movement across a spectrum from finite to infinite play, from contraction to spaciousness, with a threshold at the worldcentric stage in which the play moves distinctly toward infinite. We can define the spectrum in terms of the following characteristics and psychological elements.

Finite Play to Infinite Play

Ego-centric	Theo-centric
Low sensitivity	High sensitivity
Destructive	Creative
Undifferentiated	High agency
Disconnected	High communion
Unplayful	Playful
Prepersonal/personal	Transpersonal
Bound/inhibited	Free
Low risk	High risk

This is in no way a linear progression. In fact, prepersonal developmental stages are marked by high communion and low differentiation, while personal stages are characterized by high differentiation and low communion. But it is true that transpersonal stages more fully synthesize the two. Characteristic of infinite play is a high degree of individuality, communion, sensitivity, and creativity. At the infinite side of the play spectrum, we recognize our own infinite nature—that we are simultaneously the playground (of being), all the playmates within it, and, at the same time a completely unique and differentiated expression. We perceive the universe as one great big divine rumpus in a constant state of boundary bending, evolving play.

Lines of Development

In the Integral model, stages of development consist of lines of development. These are the particular capacities and sensitivities that comprise consciousness. These lines can also be understood as sensitivities, intelligences, or capacities. As we transform, our sensitivity increases and as we cultivate sensitivities we transform. Sensitivity defines what we can perceive and how we respond.

Through play, we open to a broader range of experiences than we normally allow. New experiences challenge us to develop new sensitivities. Play increases sensitivity by

expanding the bounds of our experience and providing opportunities to experiment with different perspectives and responses. The following diagram provides examples of some of the capacities play helps cultivate. These include sensitivity to ourselves (emotions), each other (interpersonal), the good (morality), the true (cognition), and the beautiful (aesthetics).¹⁶ Because of the embodied nature of play, we also add to this list, the sensitivity to movement (kinesthetic). Different play forms help develop different capacities and contribute unique features to play and our development (see Figure 8 below).

Capacity	Play forms	Effect
<i>Emotional</i> “How do I feel?”	Hobbies, imagination, solo adventures, expressive arts, sharing,	Play enables us to safely explore vulnerable emotional states and open to the impulse life.
<i>Interpersonal</i> “How should I interact?”	Social play, rough and tumble games, telling jokes, festivals	Play requires restraint, cooperation, and awareness of others’ comfort threshold. Play increases the capacity to take the role of the other.
<i>Moral</i> “What is right?”	Competitive and cooperative games, team sports, gambling, card and board games, thought experiments	Play teaches us to do what is good for the play. Cheating compromises play. The game can only be played if rules are followed and the players serve the play community. The more cooperation a play mode requires, the more it develops morality.
<i>Cognition</i> “What is?”	Scientific exploration and discovery, observation, debate, role-playing, perspective taking, riddles, mind games	Exploratory play allows us to explore questions and take perspectives. Through play we discover the patterns and principles that create a sense of coherence in our world.
<i>Aesthetic</i> “What is beautiful?”	The arts, improvisation, make believe, interior decorating, theater, cinematography, writing	Play cultivates a sense of symmetry, grace, economy, originality, and focus that make an object beautiful, makes play playful.
<i>Kinesthetic</i> “How do I move?”	Miming, improvisation, sports, dance, movement, ropes courses	Play occurs within a flow of engagement in which the timing either maintains or detracts from the flow. Timing determines the effectiveness of any performative act.

Figure 8: Lines of Development and Play

While we include the sense of timing in the capacity of movement, timing is best understood as a combination of a number of different lines and capacities, including the kinesthetic, aesthetic, cognitive, and interpersonal. These capacities are combined in different ways depending on the context. For example, the timing of a well-placed joke in social situations requires different sensitivity from the timing of a batter hitting a baseball, or the timing of a dramatic theater piece. Timing is crucial to play. The more

complex consciousness is, the more capable it is of skillful, appropriate, and beautiful timing. Bill Torbert (2002) emphasizes the importance and developmental dimension of timing in his notion of “timely action” which is an expression of Dynamic Play.

All these sensitivities form the basis of both good play and a healthy world. Here we get a clearer sense of the integrative function of play. Through the capacities it cultivates we are able to play more harmoniously within ourselves, with others, and the whole world.

Consciousness evolves toward increasing capacity for creative participation in greater dimensions of reality. In other words, evolution moves toward increasing playfulness in an expanded playground. As we have already discovered, we develop to become more harmonized and differentiated individuals with more flexible and integrated psyches capable of perceiving and playing with greater dimensions of reality. That is, we come to resemble and align ourselves increasingly with the play that is at the core of life and become freer to live life as play. Spiritual liberation (Unitive Play) is the awakening to all of life as play.

Transforming Through Play

"Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race."

H.G. Wells

We have seen that playfulness increases with consciousness, but the question remains: What is the role of play in transformation? In light of our Integral understanding, we can further explore three levels: 1) The state of playfulness that

supports transformation; 2) The general characteristics of play that are conducive to or specifically generate transformation; and 3) The forms of play that directly lead to transformation. Each is a big topic. In the space remaining, we focus on a few key characteristics of play that are conducive to transformation and to the forms of play that address the particular developmental challenges of each level.

The Play Leap

According to Harvard education professor Robert Kegan, consciousness transforms when the subject of awareness becomes the object of awareness; that is, when we are able to perceive the lens through which we see the world through another, more expanded lens (Kegan, 1998; Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Most work on play characterizes it as a set of features that shift the frame of activity from one domain to another through the meta-message that “this is play” (Bateson, 1972; Stewart, 1999). Generally this is meant as the shift from reality to a new play-specific space/time with its own rules of procedure. Playfulness is the attitude that makes this shift possible. It enables us to step outside of and then manipulate interpretive frames from the perspective of another.

Through play we do not learn so much the content of perspectives and behaviors as that there are sorts and categories of perspectives and behavior, and that these sorts and categories can be manipulated, can support each other (science and discovery), transform each other (art), or cancel each other out (comedy) (Koestler, 1964; Stewart, 1978). When we are able to step back from one categorical level to see and play with it from that of another we begin the process of transformation. By becoming aware of the limitations

of our perspectives, we can throw off their constraints, expanding to become not just the subject of our experience, but also the witness and player of experience.

Play detaches messages, experiences, or objects from their original context, creating a new frame that allows for greater freedom, interactivity, and creative possibilities. When we throw off the constraints of a given context, we are free to move, to engage with new contexts as well as objectify the context of our recent experience.

The paradox of play as well as its transformative power lay in the fact that the player must hold at least two contextual frames at once—the frame of the player and that of the play, the “real” and the “unreal.” Systems-thinker Gregory Bateson, describes how the meta-communication needed among players to establish that “this is play,” enables them to discover new “possibilities for thinking,” (1972). Play and other types of reframing thus prevent the organism from being trapped within one set of interpretive procedures. Discovering new interpretive procedures is at the core of the development of consciousness.

Normalizing Risk

Holding the paradox that something is simultaneously what it represents and not what it represents enables the player to engage an obstacle to play, however terrifying it may be, without risking a full loss of control. The implicit or explicit limits that bind play in space and time, make it safe for the player to surrender to the playful urge, take chances, try on new roles, and attempt tasks that, under normal circumstance, might be avoided as too difficult or unpleasant. It is a place where the novelty and risk of a new situation or experience only add to the intensity and pleasure of play. The player is able

to be in control of being out of control and so enjoy both a sense of risk and of mastery simultaneously.

Sutton-Smith offers the theory that all play is a parody of emotional vulnerability which enables primary emotions that threaten to overwhelm the player in everyday life to be engaged in a special context free of long-term consequences. “The contention is that (human) play is most fundamentally about a hidden emotional dialectic of stress versus non-stress” (2003, p.4). The stress comes from the arousal of involuntary primary emotions like anger, fear, shock, disgust, loneliness, and egomania.

Sutton-Smith contends that in play, each emotion is evoked without being fully experienced, then met with a secondary emotion such as strategy, courage, resilience, imagination, sociability, and charisma. This provides the player with a sense of mastery over the primary emotion. For example, contests parody the emotion of anger at attack and provide the opportunity to express mastery by eliciting strategies and skill, while extreme sports parody fear and provide the opportunity for courage to master the fear. Sutton-Smith defines play as,

a virtual simulation characterized by staged contingencies of variation, with opportunities for control engendered by either mastery or further chaos. Clearly the primary motive of players is...[to] mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and, in so doing, engage the propensities of mind, body, and cells in exciting forms of arousal (2001, p. 231).

It makes sense, then, that a player is often attracted to the play forms that engage the particular vulnerabilities that limit or inhibit his/her playfulness and because the

emotional tension it addresses matches those he/she faces in everyday life. If the player works in cut-throat competitive environments he/she may be drawn to cut-throat competitive sports in order to unleash anger and aggression without risking losing his/her job. Many people who are drawn to gambling identify themselves as losers in their daily lives. Gambling, for them, is a way to choose and have control over their losing, thus in some sense feeling the empowerment of winning (Bergler, 1957). The player chooses the forms that engage and master the existential stresses which tend to block playfulness in daily life.

Play also provides a way of exploring the developmental edges of the player's body, mind, and spirit in a way that enables him/her to put boundaries around what they are willing to risk. Within these boundaries the player can take leaps beyond his/her ordinary comfort to experience a wider variety of realities. New realities dislodge the player from familiar identities, enabling him/her to encounter difficult material with support and ease, to venture into their growing edge, and integrate a wider spectrum of emotional responses. It engenders the optimism needed to take risks, and shows that taking risks can bring rewards.

Transitional zones

Because play provides a safe way to engage risk, the first step toward experimenting with a new way of being is likely to be through play. As we explore transformative play, it is important to remember that we each dwell simultaneously in different stages for different lines of development. We may be Sensitive Players at church

and Aggressive Players in traffic. Within our own psyche clamors a community of playmates who all hold different worldviews. At least part of our evolutionary path is to learn to express and harmonize these players into the community of our selves and the world.

At each level of development the Player, the Playmate, and the Play Ground is transformed. In a sense the Play Self of one level becomes the Play object of the next level. The Ordered Player transforms into the Status Player in such a way that the desire and need to “follow the rules” that defined the Ordered Player no longer defines the Status Player, which can and often follows the rules but can also break them if in service of establishing status. What was subject—rule following—has now become object—rule following as an aspect of play not the basis of play. Thus, each subsequent play self has the potential to be more playful than the previous one because it is playing on a larger playground. Play becomes more complex, includes more dimensions, and involves more qualities and capacities.

While the play forms of more developed stages are almost unintelligible to those of less developed stages, the play modes just beyond our own level tend to be very attractive to us. We often dip a toe into them in the same way that we might have, as children, peeked ahead to the math or spelling problems for the next grade, or watched older kids ride bikes without training wheels. Those skills just beyond our abilities intrigue us, stirring our evolutionary appetites and pulling us toward them. The play forms that can bridge developmental levels support the transition between developmental Play Selves (see Figure 8 below)

Transition Zone	Transitional Play
Dynamic to Unitive Player	Koans, paradox
Complex to Dynamic Player	Meditation, Action Inquiry, spontaneity
Sensitive to Complex Player	Improvisation, Bohmian Dialogue, collaborative art projects
Status to Sensitive Player	Cooperative Games, Ropes Courses, The arts
Ordered to Status Player	Stock Market, Business competitions
Aggressive to Ordered Player	Competitive sports, fair and party games
Magical to Aggressive Player	Gambling, betting on results

Figure 8: Transitional Play Forms

The Magical Player might use divination and superstition when gambling, while also tasting the individual success of Aggressive Players. Aggressive Players can practice cunning and survival tactics within the context of competitive sports while learning to work as an ordered team.

We can see here that developmental stages alternate between focus on the community and focus on the individual. Beginning with magical play, the emphasis is on the needs of the community, while aggressive play emphasizes the needs of the individual and so on. This correlation has been underscored in Clare Graves' developmental model, Spiral Dynamics, and coincides with our own—though the Integral model recognizes that both agentic and communal expressions exist at each and every level, taking turns building on each other. Because of this alternating emphasis between the part and the whole, the transitional zones are characterized by a shift from one to the other. There is a natural pulse between these two sides of the spectrum and once one side is fully

developed, its opposite naturally emerges. Transitional play forms have an equal emphasis on both the needs of the group and those of the individual.

Summary

Organizing the many dimensions of the playground, both horizontally and vertically, with the Integral Model gives us a full and nuanced understanding of the dimensions of play that has eluded other approaches. Through the adult developmental model, we discover the forms of play that express different stages of consciousness and which contribute to their transformation. By understanding the transformative dynamics of play, we gain insight into the ways we can participate in our own evolution. An integral grasp of play lets us become more conscious players playing with consciousness. As a species, we now face the challenge of evolving from finite to infinite players so that our presence increases the possibilities for future play. By mapping play with an Integral model, we hope to provide the basis for further research on the transformative potential of play in adults.

Endnotes:

¹ *In Dyonisus Reborn*, Mihai Spariusa traces the agonistic power play between the rational and prerational concept of play in the history of philosophy and science.

² We use “Integral” synonymously with an AQAL approach and “integral” in the more general sense of “to include or integrate.”

³ For a complete listing of his works see Reynolds, 2004 appendix 2.

⁴ Integral Theory has been applied to a plethora of fields including: Environmental philosophy (Zimmerman, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001), Education (A. Astin, 2000; R. M. Fisher 2003; Lauzon, 1998); Medicine (Astin & Astin, 2002; Paulson, 1999b, 1999c; Schlitz, Amorok, & Micozzi. 2004); Psychology (Mikulas, 2001); Business (Paulson, 2002); Future Studies (Slaughter, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001); Intersubjectivity (Hargens, 2001); Social Action (Walsh, 2002; Moyer, 2001); Criminology (Gibbs, Giever, & Pober, 2000); Music Therapy (Bonde, 2001); Politics (Harguindey, 2003; Roof, 2003; Wilpert, 2001); Art (Grey, 1990, 1998, 2001; Dallman, 2003a, 2003b, S. Davis 1997); Near Death experiences (Paulson, 1999a); Christianity (Marion, 2000, Harris, 2001; Main, 1985); Religion (Bauwens 2003, Araya 2003); and Sustainable Development (Barrett, 2003; Hochachka, 2001; Hargens, 2002). As evidenced by these examples, Integral Theory has a wide range of applicability across divergent fields of inquiry. For additional examples consult AQAL: Journal of Integral Theory and Practice and Integral University (www.integraluniversity.org), where over 25 centers (e.g., Integral Art, Integral Medicine, Integral Science, and Integral Religious Studies) are devoted to exploring Integral approaches in their respective disciplines.

⁵ Levels can be used in two distinct ways: as a general level of altitude or as a specific level of development associated with a particular line or capacity. In this article, unless otherwise noted we will be using level to refer to levels of lines.

⁶ For the purposes of the following examples, we focus on examples for levels, lines, states, and types that are related to the individual-interior quadrant of experience. Examples could be provided for the other quadrants as well.

⁷ While both Caillois’ and Sutton-Smith’s categories can be understood from multiple quadrants, our placement is meant to highlight some of the more salient features of each category.

⁸ For research on stages of development beyond formal operations see Commons, Richards, & Armon, 1984; Alexander & Langer, 1990.

⁹ We recognize that there are many terms available to describe this progression.

¹⁰ For a detailed exploration of the non-linear qualities of this development see Wilber (1995, 1997, 2000).

¹¹ See Cook-Greuter 1999; Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1994, 2000; Torbert 1991, 2004. Cook-Greuter and Torbert’s research is based in large part on Jane Loevinger’s 1998 Sentence Completion test, which has had over 10,000 tests performed and their Leadership Development Profile which has had over 6000 tests performed.

¹² Correlates are as follows (the first term is a label we have generated, the second label is its SD correlate, and the third term is the correlate in Torbert's model): Magical Play (Purple/Impulsive), Aggressive Play (Red/Opportunist), Ordered Play (Blue/Diplomat), Status Play (Orange/Expert & Achiever), Sensitive Play (Green/Individualist), Dynamic Play (Yellow/Strategist), Integral/Complex Play (Turquoise/Magician), and Mystical Play (Coral/Ironist). Due to its minimal expression in the play literature, the Beige Meme of SD or the Symbiotic level of Cook-Greuter is not represented in this presentation. Also, note that Cook-Greuter and Torbert's two stages of Expert and Achiever are presented here as one stage: Status Play.

¹³ For a succinct and accessible article that provides a lot of detail for each self see Cook-Greuter, 2002.

¹⁴ See Jenny Wade's, 2004 research on transpersonal dimensions of sexual encounter. She is also a developmental psychologist.

¹⁵ The work of Joanna Macy and John Seed, 1988, in *Thinking Like a Mountain*, and Joanna Macy's and Molly Brown's, 1998, exercises in *Coming Back to Life*, are excellent examples of work that exercises the moral imagination and opens the self to new realms of identification.

¹⁶ The Integral model recognizes that research to date suggests that some lines lead other lines in development: cognitive development is necessary but not sufficient for interpersonal development, which is necessary but not sufficient for moral development.

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