In a child’s world, nearly everything seems related to play. Every new person, sound, and object is somehow exciting and captivating, and it is from this stimulation that the child develops new cognitive capacities and builds interpersonal relationships. As such, an entire field of psychology is dedicated to studying child play and the ways in which it contributes to psychologically and physically healthier children (Ginsburg, 2007; Vygotsky, 1967). Research among adults, however, is limited and inconclusive. Many news articles, blogs, and self-help books have attempted to inspire awareness on the subject, declaring that adult play is almost nonexistent and deserves attention. Yet adult play research continues to be underrepresented in psychology. The aim of the current proposal is to examine the types of structured “play” or leisure activities adults commonly engage in, and compare them to the less structured and imaginative play most often performed by children. I propose that, just as imaginative play builds cognitive and social resources in children, it continues to do so in adulthood.

Play behaviors can be found in young animals across the animal kingdom, and are arguably evolutionarily adaptive, preparing the young for adult tasks and roles (e.g., hunting, fighting, mating). In many nonhuman species, play drops away in adulthood; some species, however, maintain play into adulthood. For example, Bonobo apes more or less subsist on their playful interactions. As close relatives of modern humans, bonobos are similarly social creatures that rely on play for behavioral flexibility, refining cognitive and motor functioning, and establishing social dynamics and roles even into adulthood (Palagi, 2005). Accordingly, “play” for these species can be interpreted as a supplemental habit that does not necessarily aid in an animal’s survival but instead produces an improved state of living both in the individual and in the society (Boissy et al., 2007). Play seems a vital component in several social species (e.g., primates, canids, cetaceans) that affords community building and sound psychological health.

Human play is said to have four comparable elements: it is typically voluntary; it is pleasurable for its own sake and not dependent on external rewards; it involves active engagement, whether mental or physical; and it is distinct from other behavior due to its make-believe quality (Rieber, 1996). Play essentially stretches the boundaries of reality, challenges uncertainty, and entertains freedom and improvisation (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). Therefore, humans also derive emotional rewards from play, and correspondingly, some of the most compelling information on play concerns child and adolescent psychopathology. Distorted or weakened play habits, for example, appear to aggravate negative affect, self-isolation, and even mood disorders such as anxiety and depression in children and young adults (Gray, 2011; Mollous et al., 2002). Furthermore, despite popular opinion, play is not necessarily a diversion from productivity; it can actually recruit the imagination to produce more diverse and creative ideas. Play activates the mind in novel and distinct ways, and this notion has prompted extensive research on organizational behavior in adults. Research in work environments indicates that devoting time to play enables development of specific skill sets, augmented creativity, and better collaboration in groups (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006). It motivates the adult beyond simple goal assessment and provides the stimulation needed for innovation. Unfortunately, given benefits of play, adult forms of leisure are more often passive than playful. The most recent year of the American Time Use Survey shows that over 60% of adult leisure time is spent watching television, reading books, or surfing the web (Bureau of Labor, 2011). The focus of my research is to examine whether the substitution of passive leisure for play that seems to characterize American adulthood carries costs to emotional wellbeing.

In order to test these theories I will conduct a 20-minute, online study that will assess how several components of play trigger, transform, or induce certain affect states. Participants will be 150-200 working adults between ages 25 and 55, recruited through Amazon’s MTurk. For the purpose of this study, I have distinguished between imaginative play and structured play, and will contrast both of these with passive leisure. Imaginative play quite explicitly engages the creative, fantastical components of play; for instance, children often invent scenarios in which they embody characters like pirates, princesses, or even puppies. Structured
play is equally enjoyable but is bound by rules or guidelines. Examples may include team sports, Sudoku, and classic board games. This distinction is important because imaginative play, more or less synonymous with creativity, closely mimics behavior in children, and specifically, is the form of play that adults perform the least.

Participants in the study will be grouped into three conditions. The passive enjoyment control condition will present participants with a simple YouTube video showing a magic trick with cards. Though this task does not involve creativity or spontaneity, it provides sufficient enjoyment to attract the viewer and therefore serves as a comparison to experimental manipulations. In the structured play condition, participants will be asked to play a card game, such as Solitaire, so that play is being performed but is restricted by a set of rules determined by the game. Finally, participants in the imaginative play condition will complete a narrative task in which they craft characters and a storyline based on a set of face cards from a standard deck. Similar to a child playing make-believe with stuffed animals or action figures, storytelling in this fashion cultivates imaginative thinking processes. The objective of this condition is to maximize the non-structured play effects while still making the task amusing. The study design also consists of several measures assessing positive and negative mood, feelings of curiosity and sensation seeking, self-efficacy, creativity, and willingness to be social and collaborate with others (see Appendix A). Certain measures, such as mood, will be assessed before and after the manipulation to test whether the task positively influenced the participant. I expect that all three conditions – passive enjoyment, structured play, and imaginative play – will increase positive mood. Additionally, however, I expect the imaginative play condition will evoke higher feelings of curiosity, creative thinking, self-efficacy, and sociality as compared to both the structured play and passive enjoyment control condition. Final analyses and explorations of main effects and interactions will be calculated using SPSS Statistics software.

Extending beyond the experiment, I also plan to analyze Northwestern’s archival data, such as the General Social Survey’s data on leisure and mood. Collecting this information is another way to enhance my project by organizing and investigating past attempts at researching similar topics. Finally, as I begin to consider a Psychology Honors Thesis examining similar aspects of play, I will use my additional time and funding to pilot materials and measures for upcoming studies. These materials – such as surveys, scales, and condition stimuli – will be tested on paid participants in a lab setting. In this way, I can gather invaluable feedback and create more efficient and productive methods for my work during senior year.

Conducting a personal research project is an incredible opportunity to pursue my own interests while implementing what I have gained from my coursework at Northwestern. Courses like Psychopathology, Cultural Psychology, Research Methods, and a research seminar on Emotion have enriched my knowledge of psychology and have prepared me for further endeavors in the field. To date, I have also worked in two social psychology labs, studying prejudice and racial relations with Professor Richeson, and emotion and the self with Professor Gardner. These experiences have offered me a firsthand look at professional psychological research and have incentivized me to create this project. I hope to synthesize what I have learned and apply it to this research on adult play, with the intention of uncovering some of the relationships between play and positive affect.

In children, the empirical evidence readily demonstrates that play fosters trust, increases creativity and cognitive resilience, relieves stress, and even influences general welfare. Because of its potential impact on individuals, it is an important element in daily life that is nonetheless seemingly abandoned in adulthood. Research in both children and non-human animals already provides insight into these benefits, but I will be expanding on these and apply them to an adult audience, effectively to encourage the reconsideration of today’s values surrounding adult play. To the extent that my thesis documents the benefits of imaginative play in adulthood, adults might be encouraged to reintegrate these playful aspects into their daily lives, thereby profiting from increased positive affect, creativity, and wellbeing.
References