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The Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM): A Pilot Study

Pete King
Swansea University, p.f.king@swansea.ac.uk

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E: p.f.king@swansea.ac.uk

Abstract

This pilot study of the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) provides a method to record the process of play as outlined by the Sturrock and Else (1998) Play Cycle. Using a single four-minute video, five participants mapped the Play Cycles of a boy (aged 5–6 years) and a girl (aged 9–10 years) and recorded quantitative data in relation to: recording the play cues prior to and then within established Play Cycles; the number of Play Cycles; and how long each Play Cycle lasted. In addition, more qualitative data can be recorded with respect to the nature of the play cues, play frames, annihilation (how the Play Cycle ends) and the adult role in the Play Cycle. Results from this pilot study indicate that the PCOM can provide a consistent way of recording Play Cycles, which can have a benefit for playwork practice, playwork qualifications and playwork training.

Key Words: play cycle; Play Cycle Observation Method; play; playwork
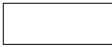
Introduction

The Play Cycle (Sturrock & Else, 1998) is a process of play that can be broken down into six component parts: meta-lude; play cue; play return; play frame; loop and flow; and annihilation. The Play Cycle begins with an initial thought or idea to play (meta-lude) within the child's 'inner world'. The child may emit this thought or idea to the 'outer world' as a play cue. If the play cue is picked up (by another person for example), this is the play return. The combination of the play cue and play return re-enters the child's inner world, constituting

the loop and flow. Once established, the Play Cycle is framed in a physical or non-physical boundary: the play frame. Once the Play Cycle finishes or breaks down, then annihilation is reached (Sturrock & Else, 1998). This simplified explanation of the Play Cycle has some components more easily visible, for example the play cue, play return, annihilation and often the play frame are easily observable. Both the meta-lude and loop and flow are not so easily observable.

Since its introduction in 1998, the Play Cycle now underpins professional playwork practice within the eight Playwork Principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005), playwork books supporting playwork qualifications (Gallagher & Davy, 2006; Farrow, Stevens & Stanley, 2003), training resources (Stobart, 1998), books on playwork theory (Brown, 2002) and books on play (Else, 2009). For the playwork practitioner, whether at work or whilst studying, observing and having an understanding of the process of play is what makes playwork unique and important for reflective practice (King, 2015; King & Waibel, 2016; Kilvington and Wood, 2010). An understanding of the Play Cycle "allows playworkers to describe and understand the process of playing as it happens … where playworkers can now describe the cues and returns they see children offering and they can intuit the play fame being used" (Else, 1999, p. 7). There are two aspects that need consideration with regards to the Play Cycle. First, there is no empirical research with regards to playworkers' understanding of it. Second, although there have been some studies that have used elements of the Play Cycle (Nottingham City Council (NCC) & Russell, 2008), there is no consistency on how the components of the Play Cycle are being recorded. Although Else (1999) provides detail of a play–observation checklist developed by a playwork student that involved the play cue, play return and play frame, the effectiveness or usefulness of the checklist is not evident. This is the aim of this paper: to pilot a method of recording the Play Cycle.

Observations of children's play have been used for developmental outcomes (Brassard & Boehm, 2008). However, Howard & McInnes (2013) make the point that we must "consider the value of observing play as a process" (p. 104). For newly appointed playworkers, or those involved in undertaking playwork qualifications, observation is a key aspect with regards to the Play Cycle. The Play Cycle Observational Mapping (PCOM) method is not designed to measure play or outcomes of play, but rather to provide an observational tool for people to observe and map the Play Cycle. Sturrock (2004), as part of a therapeutic playwork course offered at the University of Gloucestershire, developed a nomenclature for the Play Cycle (see Figure 1). The aim of this nomclature was to provide a shorthand way of mapping children's play cues and play returns, the loop and flow, play frame and when the play cycle is annihilated. The length and duration of the play cycle is mapped, as well as potential adult intervention.

Symbol	Component of the Play Cycle	Notes
→	Play Cue (how was the cue issued?)	
↙	Play Return (what was the response to the cue?)	
⟲	Loop and Flow (what was the reaction to the play return)	
▭	Play Frame (type of play and where the play cycle is taking place)	
X	Annihilation (how did the play cycle end?)	
△→	Containment (At what point did the adult support the play cycle?)	

Figure 1: Play Cycle Nomenclature based on Sturrock (2004)

Although the nomenclature provided the scope to look at the different elements of the Play Cycle, as a student in this course I found writing brief notes difficult, as often play cues

are happing so fast that you can miss what is happening when you're busy writing. Instead, I used the nomenclature and developed a way of mapping the components of the Play Cycle. Now, fourteen years later, the PCOM has been developed using a more short-hand-type approach. The aim of this paper is to pilot the PCOM in relation to both ease of use and consistency.

Method

This study was approved by the College of Human and Health Science Ethics Committee at Swansea University. The participants of the pilot study were students in a Master's degree course in play where the theory of the Play Cycle is discussed and the students must complete fifty hours of fieldwork in order to link the theory to play practice. The students also come from a diverse play background and are therefore not all playworkers. All students were invited to take part and it was stressed that participation was voluntary and had no bearing on their studies. In total, five students volunteered to take part in the pilot study, and in addition to their diverse backgrounds, three students were from the UK and two outside the UK.

Procedure

The five participants were invited to watch a YouTube video of children playing titled "Boys at Fort Apache showing how they 'LoveOutdoorPlay'" (Sylvan Adventures, 2013). The video is 4.02 minutes in length and consists of four boys and one girl playing in a woodland environment. Although not visible, there are two adults present, one male and one female, whose voices are heard at two points during the video. The choice of using a video enabled all participants to watch the same children playing, thus providing reliability in relation to using the PCOM on the same video. In addition, the video allowed the participants to pause,

rewind and review the children's play. As with other observational tools (see, for example Ruben, 1989), the PCOM only focused on one "target child" at a time. The participants were asked to watch the video three times. The goal of the first viewing was to get an overall picture of the play, reflecting Ruben's (1989) procedure of observers spending time to identify "contextual cues" (p. 8). In the second viewing, each participant was asked to focus on a boy who appears to be aged around 5–6 years. The third viewing was focused on an older girl (aged 9–10 years). All participants watched the video individually in a PC lab but with headphones so as not to disturb one other. The use of the same video for each participant, with the same viewing instructions, enabled a like for like comparison between participants observing the episode of play.

In addition to focusing on the target child, participants were asked to record any adult intervention they found in any Play Cycle. This was undertaken by recoding if any adult issued a play cue, responded to a play cue (play return) or supported the Play Cycle using Sturrock & Else's (1998) hierarchy of intervention — play maintenance, simple involvement, medial involvement and complex involvement. Two days in advance of watching the video, all participants were sent an instruction sheet to provide details of the Play Cycle as a reminder and advanced notice on how to complete the PCOM sheet. A copy of the PCOM instruction sheet is in the Appendix to this paper. The PCOM Record Sheet is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: The Play Cycle Observation Mapping (PCOM) Recording Sheet

Before starting, each participant was reminded that taking part was voluntary and that at any point they could leave without explanation. The process of recording the Play Cycle was discussed to ensure participants understood the task. Each participant was provided with six PCOM sheets, but it was stressed that more were available as no indication on the number of Play Cycles that may be seen was provided.

In addition to watching the video and record the Play Cycle of the two target children, once completed, each participant was asked to fill out an evaluation form on using the PCOM. The evaluation questions were:

- How did you find using the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) Record Sheet?
- What elements of the Play Cycle were easiest to record?

- What elements of the Play Cycle were difficult to record?

- Could the PCOM Record Sheet be improved, if yes then how?

- Is there anything else you would like to add?

- On a scale of 1–10, how useful was the PCOM as an observational tool? (Please circle one number only, with 1 being Not At All Useful and 10 being Very Useful.)

Results

The time to complete the task varied from twenty minutes to forty-five minutes (this included the explanation of using the PCOM method, the three viewings of the video and the time participants took to stop and review any segments of the video). The initial feedback from the participants indicated that the recording of the play cue and play return was not a problem, however distinguishing the loop and flow and the play frame was not clear cut. As the loop and flow was not easily observable, it was left out of the analysis. However, the play frame remained in the analysis. Table 1 shows the recording table designed to enter the data from each participant.

	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6	Column 7	Column 8
	Target Child Initiates play cue	Non-Target Child initiates play cue	Adult initiates play cue	Return and Play Cycle Established	Length of Play Cycle	Target Child issues play cues in established Play Cycle	Non-Target child issues play cues in established Play Cycle	Adult issues play cue in established Play Cycle
PCOM 1								
PCOM 2								
Total								
Average								

Table 1: Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) Record Sheet Table

Table 1 shows the number of play cues initiated by either the target child, non-target children or an adult (columns 1–3). It also illustrates the number of Play Cycles established

(column 4), where not all initial play cues result in the formation of Play Cycles. The length of each Play Cycle is also shown (column 5). For each established Play Cycle, the number of cues issued by the target child, non-target child or an adult can be shown (columns 6–8). Each column can be totalled and it is possible to work out various averages:

- Average play cues initiated by the target child compared to non-target children and adults (column 1/column 1 + column 2 + column 3 x 100), as well as the average play cues for both the non-target children and adults;

- Average number of Play Cycles and those resulted from total initial play cues issued (column 4/column 1 + column 2 + column 3 x 100);

- Average time for the Play Cycle (column 4/number of established Play Cycles x 100); and

- Average play cues initiated by the target child within established Play Cycles (column 6/column 6 + column 7 + column 8 x 100), which can also be used to find the average number of play cues initiated by non-target children and adults within established Play Cycles.

The total initial play cues, Play Cycles established, length of Play Cycles and play cues issued in established Play Cycles from the five participants are shown in Table 2.

Boy	Target Child Initiates play cue	Non-Target Child initiates play cue	Adult initiates play cue	Return and Play Cycle Established	Length of Play Cycle	Target Child issues play cues in established Play Cycle	Non-Target child issues play cues in established Play Cycle	Adult issues play cue in established Play Cycle
Participant 1	3	1		3	41	10	8	0
Participant 2	3	1		4	58	13	17	0
Participant 3	4	0		4	52	10	7	0
Participant 4	5	0		5	17	10	10	0
Participant 5	9	2		4	28	8	10	0
Average	86%	14%		71%	39 secs	49%	51%	0%

Girl	Target Child Initiates play cue	Non-Target Child initiates play cue	Adult initiates play cue	Return and Play Cycle Established	Length of Play Cycle	Target Child issues play cues in established Play Cycle	Non-Target child issues play cues in established Play Cycle	Adult issues play cue in established Play Cycle
Participant 1	7	0		6	6.83	7	5	
Participant 2	1	2		4	15	4	5	
Participant 3	2	1		2	12	2	4	
Participant 4	2	2		3	11.66	7	6	
Participant 5	3	2		2	26	2	5	
Average	68%	32%		77%	14.30	47%	53%	

Table 2: Recorded Play Cycles for Target Boy and Target Girl

Participants recorded the boy target child issuing 86% of the initial play cues using both verbal and/or physical cues, such as waving a sword, with the established play frame a sword fight or a pretend fight with sticks. The average number of Play Cycles established in the four-minute video was four, which was 71% of play cues forming Play Cycles (twenty Play Cycles established from twenty-eight play cues). The average length of each Play Cycle was thirty-nine seconds. Once the Play Cycle was established, the target child and non-target children issued on average a similar number of play cues within the established Play Cycles (49% for the target child and 51% for non-target children). Adult involvement only occurred on two occasions: verbal interventions (not visible on the video); and interventions recorded as play maintenance or simple intervention. The annihilation of the Play Cycle was mostly established by a non-target child finishing the Play Cycle.

The girl target child issued 68% of the play cues (compared to 32% for non-target children), where on average 3.4 Play Cycles were formed. From the twenty-two play cues, seventeen resulted in a Play Cycle (77%). The play cues were physical in nature, however, there was one occasion where the target girl issued the play cue with no response, thus forming a Play Cycle on her own. The average time for the girl target child's Play Cycle was 14.3 seconds. Once the Play Cycle was established, the girl target child issued twenty-two

play cues (47%), compared to twenty-five play cues (53%) for the non-target children. The annihilation of the Play Cycle was established by a combination of other non-target children, the target child and adult intervention.

All participants recorded the adult as intervening for play maintenance, and two participants also recorded them as simple interventions. Although the adults were not visible on the video, on two occasions they could be heard. The first is when the target girl shot an arrow close to another child's eye, and the second is when all the children were waving wooden sticks and swords in a fight (although nobody was hurt or hit). The hierarchy of adult intervention by Sturrock and Else (1998) is easy to apply with regards to play maintenance (an adult in an observer role) and simple intervention (an adult providing resource or action to help maintain the Play Cycle). However, the more active aspects of medial and complex intervention, where the adult is active within the Play Cycle, would not have been recorded. Upon reflection, the adult role could be recorded within a single box on the PCOM, which could then consider if adults are controlling or stopping Play Cycles for an adult agenda (Sturrock and Else (1998) term this 'adulteration').

Comparing Participants' Observed Play Cycles

Table 2 shows how each participant mapped the Play Cycles for both the target boy (average of four Play Cycles) and the target girl (average of three Play Cycles). For each participant, established Play Cycles are placed on a linear timeline of 0 seconds to 242 seconds (4:02 minutes of video). A visual comparison between each participant mapping of Play Cycles can be shown in Figure 3. This mapping of the Play Cycles reflects the average number of Play Cycles from the five participants. For the target boy being observed, between 0 seconds and 105 seconds, three Play Cycles can be mapped: 0–45 seconds; 45–85 seconds; and 90–106 seconds. A fourth Play Cycle appears at 168–195 seconds. This indicates that the boy target

child's shortest Play Cycle is 16 seconds and the longest 45 seconds. If we compare the number of play cues being issued within the established boy target Play Cycles, there is a considerable similarity of scoring between Participants 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see Table 2).
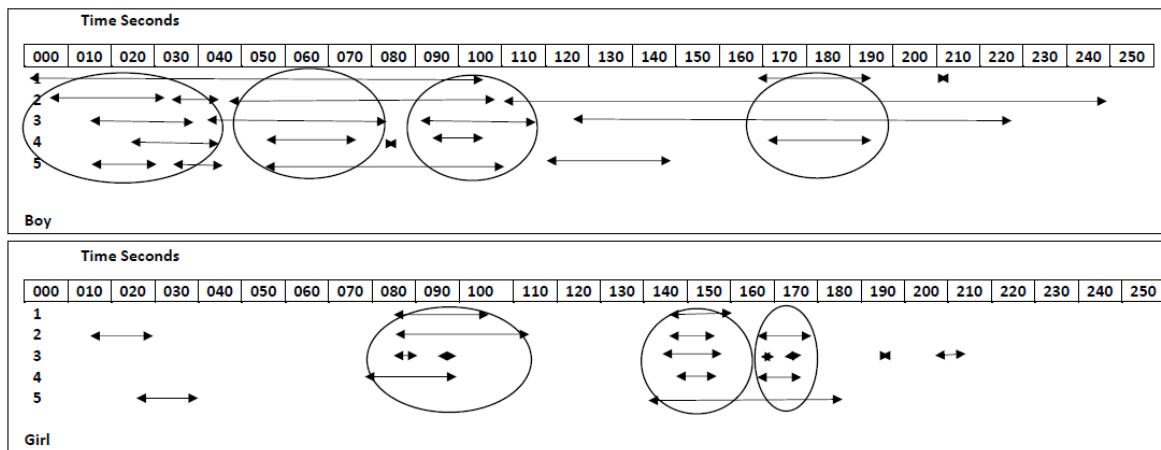
Figure 3: Mapping of Play Cycles for the Target Boy and Target Girl

For the girl target child, the participants overlap three clear Play Cycles: 79–114 seconds; 143–158 seconds; and 164–178 seconds. Again, this reflects the average number of Play Cycles from the five participants. The length of the Play Cycles range from 14 seconds to 35 seconds — shorter in duration than the target boy. Again, there is clear similarity in how participants scored for play cues within established Play Cycles for both the girl target child and non-target children (see Table 2). The mapping and comparison of the participants' Play Cycles for both the target boy and target girl provides some indication of consistency of the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) being implemented.

Participant Evaluation and Feedback

Each participant was asked to complete an evaluation form in relation to using the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) recording sheet. The feedback from all participants was that the recording sheet (along with the background information) made it easy to understand and

use. Although the PCOM was used with a video — allowing for participants to pause and rewind, which you would not be able to do if observing in real time — it was commented that with practice the PCOM could be used in real time. Both the play cue and the Play Cycles were the easiest elements to spot. However, it was commented that the loop and flow and play frame was more problematic. For this reason, the loop and flow box can be removed, leaving the play frame, which would make it easier to record either the type of game (in this case sword fighting) or where the Play Cycle is taking place (such as in the bushes). This would reflect the play frame being a non-physical boundary (sword fight) or a physical boundary (bushes) (Sturrock & Else, 1998).

In the recording of the Play Cycles, it was noted by participants that the tallying of cues within established Play Cycles was easy to complete. One comment was how could the Play Cycle be used in relation to dominant and less dominant children. This would relate to the importance of observing cues within established Play Cycles, as it could be non-target children issuing them (making the target child less dominant in the Play Cycle), or the target child being dominant and issuing more cues. The comparison between the target boy and target girl showed that, in their relevant Play Cycles, there was equality of target and non-target cues for both, however, the boy target child issued twice as many cues within his Play Cycles as the target girl. Another important point raised was the number of play cues a target child may initiate before a play return was given. This is reflected with the girl target child who initiated a play cue that was not picked up by a non-target child, but instead resulted in them forming a thirty-second Play Cycle. This is consistent with a play return and can be a result of the physical environment. What is important is that all play cues from the target child are recorded, even if a play cycle is not formed. This enables a recording of the target child's initiation of play cues compared to the number of returns, and hence established Play Cycles. It was clear that the target boy's play cues were being picked up more than those of

the target girl. Each participant was asked to score the PCOM recording sheet on a scale of 0 (Not At All Useful) to 10 (Very Useful). The average score was 8.6, indicating all five participants considered the PCOM a useful method in mapping out Play Cycles.

Discussion

The Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) has enabled the mapping of play cues and play returns to identify and establish a Play Cycle. In turn, the play frame is named and the length of the Play Cycles can be measured. Within the established play cycle, the play cues that are still initiated by the participants involved provide insight into how the Play Cycles are maintained. The final aspect of the Play Cycle, annihilation, can also be considered with regards to who and how the Play Cycle is terminated. The PCOM can be used with four aspects of the Play Cycle: play cue; play return; play frame; and annihilation. Although initially the PCOM considered the loop and flow, this aspect has now been removed, as, along with the meta-lude, it is a difficult aspect to observe. The PCOM originally considered recording the adult role using the adult intervention hierarchy (Sturrock & Else, 1998). However, although recording of the adult in relation to established Play Cycles is possible, this can be undertaken with a short descriptive account. A further modification to the PCOM as a result of the evaluation is to record the total number of children in the Play Cycle. A revised PCOM is shown in Figure 4.

PCMO Record Sheet Number:

Key:
- Play Cue – 1a target child, 1b non-target child or 1c adult
- Play return – 2a target child, 2b another child, 2c adult or 2d non-human
- Play Frame
- X   Annihilation

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Issue Play Cue	Number of play cues observed in established Play Cycle	Number of people
1a Target Child		1
1b Another Child		
1 c Adult		

The PCOM focuses on the process of play and provides the scope to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. This quantitative data shows how many play cues are issued, both prior to and within established Play Cycles. This can indicate how passive or dominant the target child is prior to initiating or within established Play Cycles, as well as the number of people involved. In addition, the number and length of Play Cycles can be assessed, wherein the target child may be involved in a short number of Play Cycles lasting minutes or a long number of Play Cycles lasting mere seconds. More qualitative data can be derived from the PCOM in relation to the types of play frames being established and how the Play Cycles are annihilated. For the former, the type of play frame can be considered in relation to Hughes' (2002) sixteen Play Types. In addition, the type of adult intervention can be assessed, wherein the adult may take a more active role or a more passive role, as an observer or resource, in the Play Cycle. The active role can be determined in respect to how much control the adult appears to have over the Play Cycle, which considers the aspect of adulteration (Sturrock & Else, 1998).

Who Can Use the Play Cycle Observation Method?

The PCOM provides the scope to not only be used to observe Play Cycles being created, but to help the practitioner see how they can be maintained. As well as being used as an observational tool, the information gained could be used in developing and planning play provision in relation to the children who use it. The PCOM can also be used as a training tool to support vocational playwork qualifications, as well as other professionals who work with children in a play context. This would be a benefit for:

- new playworkers to link the theory of the Play Cycle to their practice;

- playwork or play trainers for use as a training tool;

- other professionals working in children's services (childcare, nurseries, childminding, teachers, learning support assistants, lunchtime supervisors);

- professionals working in specialist provision (autism, ADHD, therapeutic environments);

- students in both playwork and other play-related courses; and

- researchers of children's play.

There are limitations to this pilot study. The first is that while the mapping of the Play Cycles shows similarity, the pilot sample is small. Play cues can be easily missed, even with the use of video, as illustrated by some participants recording play cues that did not result in Play Cycles, whilst others recording all play cues forming Play Cycles. This could be a procedural aspect, where the increased use of the PCOM makes the observer more skilled. Again, this could be useful for both a teaching aid as well as for other aspects of playwork, such as reflective practice. The PCOM does need to be piloted in real time, where there is no

chance to rewind or pause the play. Therefore, it is suggested that no more than 5- to 10-minute observations be undertaken on a target child. This time span is considered appropriate in other play observation tools (see, for example, Ruben, 1989).

Conclusion

The PCOM pilot has shown that both the play cue and the play return can be easily recorded. From the initial play cues, the number of Play Cycles formed can be calculated, along with naming the play frame. The length of established Play Cycles is also easily measured, and this can be useful with regards to the number of children and the length of time they stay within a Play Cycle. Within established Play Cycles, the number of play cues for all the children involved, both target and non-target, can provide a quantitative measure of the extent to which children are dominant or passive within the Play Cycle. The recording of the adult role can show how passive or active they are in the Play Cycle and help to illuminate the adulteration of the Play Cycle (if the adult is too dominant in the Play Cycle, for example). The PCOM provides a useable observational tool to reflect the theory of the Play Cycle.

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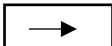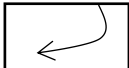Sturrock, G. (2004). *Introduction to Therapeutic Playwork Workbook. Ludemos: Sheffield.*

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Appendix

Play Cycle Observation Method Instruction Sheet

The Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) is designed to map the Play Cycle of individual children (or target children). The initial play cue may come from the target child, from another child or an adult. The key aspect is that a play cue has a response for a Play Cycle to start. Sometimes the Play Cycle may last a few seconds, other times it may last for hours.

1. When the target child issues a cue (code 1a), or a cue is issued to the target child (either 1b or 1c) this is the starting point and use the icon [→] and briefly describe the play cue. In addition, write down the start time of the play cue on the [⊤] time-scale icon at the top.

2. If the play cue is given a response (play return) (2a if the target child,) use the icon [↙] and briefly describe the play return.

3. From the play cue and play return, use the icon [↻] and briefly describe response to the play cue and play return

4. Using icon [ ] provide a name to the Play Cycle and state where the Play Cycle is taking place.

5. Once the Play Cycle has formed, play cues do not stop. Record the number of play cues and who is issuing them provided they are within the Play Cycle that has formed in the relevant table

6. Throughout the Play Cycle, observe and record the adult intervention in the relevant table. Be aware that the intervention may be visual (you see the adult) or verbal (you hear the adult). Use the hierarchy chart to determine the level of intervention of the adult within the Play Cycle [Δ⊢]

7. Using the icon $\boxed{\textbf{X}}$ record the time the Play Cycle finishes place at the end of the time-scale $\boxed{}$ and write down the end time of the play cue and how it ended. For example, did the child finish the play cycle, or was it due to factors outside of the child

8. If the Play Cycle begins again, then record it as another Play Cycle and use a new PCOM Record Sheet and go through the process again.