In his 1955 classic *Homo Ludens* (‘Man at Play’), Johan Huizinga describes the importance of play in everyday life. He posits that the play-concept is irreducible, consisting of a means for attaining freedom from “real life.” Play is “more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical and purely biological activity. It is a significant function — that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate need of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something.”

Since its publication, the play-concept may have changed due to technology, availability of leisure time (or lack of it!), or societal values, but the importance of play remains a key element of culture and civilization. In this issue of the atlas, we examine how the residents of the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area play – just in time for summer! We explore differences, county-by-county, of several recreational activities that are part of our lives. The way we play may vary from place to place, or community to community and the maps in this atlas provide examples of the contrasts and similarities using a few indoor and outdoor activities. Perhaps, through looking at these maps, we may find ways that our play brings us together as a region, a community, and a people.

To understand how we play, we draw on data provided from several sources, and housed in an online map server called Simply Maps™. Simply Maps™ is a product of a New York-based private company by the name of Geographic Research, Inc (GRI). GRI compiles data from several sources, including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Census, and market surveys, to characterize consumer preferences of Americans. All the data we present are for the calendar year 2008 and are at the spatial scale of the U.S. Census block group. The data reflect annual expenditures of the people living in each block group. While the data from Simply Maps may not be 100% accurate — mainly due to the fact that they are sampled data as opposed to an exhaustive survey of every resident in our region – these data are commonly used for citing grocery stores, retail outlets, and other national franchises. Accordingly, we exercise caution in creating maps using these data in our attempt to illustrate “play-time” in the metroscape.
We begin with gardening, specifically the expenditures per capita on garden-related products, which include soil, shovels, fertilizers, plants, and other equipment used for outdoor areas. Immediately apparent is the range of amounts being spent on outdoor gardening. Columbia County spent between $109 and $150 per person in 2008 on garden materials, while those living in Washington County spent between $71 and $235 on similar materials. While no absolutely clear patterns emerge from assessing the spatial distribution of gardening expenditures, in general we see that people living in rural areas spend about as much as those living in more urbanized areas (e.g., Yamhill and Columbia counties versus Multnomah County). Nor do these patterns correlate to readily apparent demographic conditions (e.g., higher income, education, or age). These maps do suggest that metroscapers have a keen interest in playing with their gardens.
Expenditures per Capita by Census Blockgroup Garden Supplies, 2007

- $15 - $59
- $60 - $103
- $104 - $147
- $148 - $191
- $192 - $235
We now move indoors to examine the total 2008 expenditures on theater. While theater can encompass several types of playful activities, the description here refers mainly to dramas, operas, comedy shows, or other similar live performances (not including music venues). The total amount spent on theater is generally less than that spent on outdoor gardening, with a total range of $2 to $40. Unlike gardening, however, theater produces some spatial patterns, particularly in terms of urban and rural counties. As expected, areas near live theaters, such as downtown (Theater district) and the inner eastside of Portland, have higher rates of theater patronage. Although spending slightly less than those in Multnomah and Washington counties, those living in Yamhill County spent $4 to $25 on theater last year. In Clark County, those living closer to downtown spent more on theater than did those living in more rural areas.

Source for all maps: Simply Maps™
Expenditures per Capita by Census Blockgroup Theater, 2007

- $2 - $10
- $11 - $17
- $18 - $25
- $26 - $32
- $33 - $40
A more specific theater activity is attending country music events. Country music events describe a specific type of music generally played at concert halls throughout the region. While we could assume that those living in rural areas of the region might spend more on country music, data from Simply Maps™ do not reveal such patterns. Although considerable variation exists, Washington, Columbia and Clackamas counties seem to be spending the most on country music – these counties range from $24 to $86 spent on country music events per year. Yamhill, Multnomah and Clark seem to have the greatest variation by Census Block Group (from $6 to $95) in the amount spent per capita on country music.
Finally, as many recent publications suggest, birdwatching is an activity of growing popularity across demographic groups. Birdwatching generally consists of a recreational activity occurring within a private yard, regional wildlife refuge, or in most areas considered “open space.” Generally, metroscape residents are spending less money on birdwatching than any of the other activities mentioned here. Perhaps because birdwatching requires less equipment, or doesn’t require tickets for entrance, metroscape residents are spending on average about $27 per person per year on birdwatching, as opposed to $101 for outdoor gardening, $30 for country music, and $20 for theater. Such frugal ways to play may become more popular if more people experience financial hardships, but such trends will require more evaluations over longer periods of time.

If playing, as Huizinga states, “more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex,” what we learn about ourselves by looking at how we play regardless of the specific activity, is that the differences between rural and urban seem to disappear.