

Play and the Private

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Abstract

Over the past half a century or more, historical, anthropological and philosophical examinations of the concept of play have remained largely situated in the arena of ontological discussion. In these previous interrogations of play, the notion of play has been assumed a priori, been defined stipulatively in relation to larger frameworks of games, or discarded altogether.

This work adopts Wittgenstein's Private Language argument as a lever to unpack the usefulness in looking at play from an epistemological perspective: paying special attention to linguistic cues, ostensive relationships and associated activities around those things players call 'play' within specific, behavioral, situational and linguistic contexts. This paper explores how unraveling the term 'play' in this way can potentially afford us a new perspective on play as an epistemologically dynamic phenomenon.

Author Keywords

Play, language, game, epistemology, meaning

"Games have a long-running, deep and habitual association with 'play', itself a shallowly examined term."

Thomas Malaby

"In the universal silence of nature and in the calm of the senses the immortal spirit's hidden faculty of knowledge speaks an ineffable language and gives [us] undeveloped concepts, which are indeed felt, but do not let themselves be described."

Immanuel Kant

Introduction

Since the mid-to-late 20th century, there have emerged numerous theoretical treatments of the concept of 'play'. These treatments have arisen from across a landscape of disciplines stretching from cultural anthropology to behaviorist psychology, but as has been recently remarked, the body of literature which makes up modern play canon has stumbled in its attempt to adequately define play in any substantial manner (Malaby, 2007; Galloway, 2006). Definitions have either remained too broad (Huizinga, 1950; Gadamer, 1976) or, in less frequent cases, too parochial (Callois, 1961; Hans, 1981). As Brian Sutton-Smith once mused, "any earnest definition of play has to be haunted by the possibility that playful enjoinders will render it invalid" (2001), and Sutton-Smith's own work, as well as the work of others, have frequently presented such enjoinders.



Sutton-Smith suggests that play can only be defined insofar as the rhetoric of a particular field or discipline allows. These rhetorics range from ‘animal play’ to ‘developmental child’s play’ – but is this as far as we can take an analysis of play? Are there rhetorics unaccounted for? Does even a vaguely outlined system of rhetorical categorization ultimately collapse upon itself under the weight of relativism, rendering such a system as questionable as the irreconcilable accounts of play held under it?

With such questions unresolved, we are left with play as a term whose meaning is either 1) a priori or fully assumed, effectively rendering the term meaningless or; 2) at best defined entirely by its relationship to game-based engagement or a specific discipline of study. J. Barnard Gilmore asserts that, "everyone knows what play is *not* even if everyone can't agree on just what play is" (1971). This work will suggest that even Gilmore's first statement should be thoroughly re-evaluated.

If notions of play have been corralled into a state of inconclusiveness and hesitation, how do we unpack play in a new or novel way that permits a greater understanding of it? Why *should* we have a greater understanding?

A deeper analysis of play stands only to nourish our investigative endeavors in game studies and, more specifically, further inform the fervent study of massively multiplayer games that continues to blaze forward in the ‘World of Warcraft’ era of online gaming. Such an analysis might aid us in shuffling off a paradigmatic coil encrusted with false dichotomies that pit ‘work vs. play’ or ‘play vs. ordinary life’ – dichotomies which have been notably polemicized in recent game studies research (Taylor 2006; Dibbell, 2006 & Galloway, 2006). Polarizing perspectives such as these have remained largely unproductive, presenting significant hindrances in our exploration of play as an experiential phenomenon.

As will be suggested here, our inability to concretely define play may well be symptomatic of the concept defying ontological restraints. With modern day definitions of play tending towards a concatenation of previous interpretations of the term, we may have arrived at a point where our language ceases to be able to express the concept with any more acuity.

Shifting our attention to language then, how do we come to know what it is that we *call* ‘play’ to begin with? How do we *know* how to label such a thing when we experience it? Moving away from an ontological emphasis, what might an epistemological examination of play look like?

This paper adopts the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose examination of language supports the idea that a language is not only a culmination of words and utterances but also a meaningful activity: a practice that intones a particular organic quality and which is rooted in the dynamism of those participating. This work will use Wittgenstein’s Private Language argument in an effort to unpack a unique perspective on epistemologies of play through an examination of language use in describing activities which are both privately and publicly experienced.

Play and Private Language

Wittgenstein previously argued that simply distilling the basic elements of games (for example, rules and outcomes) is a process that falls short of piecing together what a game can be defined as. He consequently asserted that the concept 'game' could not be contained by any single definition, but that games must be considered as a fluid body of concepts that share a "family resemblance" to one another (1953). It was family resemblances which could bring us close, but never quite to the point of understanding what a game truly is. For Wittgenstein, there is no conceptual essence to be sought.

Concepts such as 'game' and 'play' are conceived of through comparison between phenomena, communal agreement, perceived similarity and context – all mediated by language. The derivation of family resemblances never stem from an unimpeachable level of objectivity, but rather an assumed context, a paradigm of inquiry, an epistemological foundation. To generate a concept of what constitutes 'play', Wittgenstein, like Sutton-Smith, would not need to go far before concluding that definitions of this concept would vary between disciplines.

How did we learn to understand the word 'plant', then? Perhaps we learnt a definition of the concept, say in botany, but I leave out that of account since it only has a role in botany. Apart from that, it is clear that we learnt the meaning of the word by example; and if we disregard hypothetical dispositions, these examples stand only for themselves.

(Wittgenstein, 1978, p. 117)

This passage (and others like it in the *Philosophical Investigations*) is critical simply insofar as it interrogates the manner in which concepts like 'play' come to life, suggesting that concepts are not born of universal truth, but are products of fluctuating and often seemingly arbitrary origins. In the words of Gramsci, "a linguistic form can be expressive and justified inasmuch that it has function" (Ives, 2006).

Given that we possess no sense of determinacy to validate any universal truth through our perceptions, the emergence of a concept is a constantly shifting and undulating process which wavers ever closer to determination, but never reaches it (Wittgenstein, 1953). This very process defies rigidity and instead reflects more of a Heideggerian notion of mindfulness: an ongoing cognizance of the shifting elements and contexts from which a given concept has emerged that permits us a greater understanding of that concept, but only ever fleeting contact with any transcendental knowledge that might be associated with it (Heidegger, 1976).

Returning to play, we find ourselves in somewhat of a different predicament given the elusive nature of the term. Play clearly transcends the merely corporeal. It is immaterial even though there may be material evidence of its occurrence. It can be said that we each have our own 'play', but that subjectivity is one often shared in practice. Play is something both publicly and privately experienced – often at the same time. How do we express those things which are not purely capable of being agreed upon through ostensive means? Can one point to a teammate during a game of hockey and authoritatively claim that they are playing?

For Gregory Bateson, “the actions of ‘play’ are related to or denote other actions of ‘not play’” (2006, p. 314). To rephrase, all things ‘play’ and ‘not play’ are denoted through cues or signals that we associate with either state. This is what Bateson refers to as the ‘nip’ and the ‘bite’; rooted in the observation that when animals play-fight, a nip denotes a bite, but never denotes what a real bite denotes. This theory of play revolves around the exchanging of signals between participants that indicate when play is happening and when it is not.

For Bateson then, it is possible that we may point to a cue that we believe to be representative of ‘play’ because we are surrounded by other signals that indicate play to us. This, by Bateson’s estimation, is a characteristic of unconscious, ‘primary-process’ thinking (2006).

Thus, play does not take place in a magic circleⁱ per se, but a ‘psychological frame’. Every act of ‘metacommunication’ regarding a particular form of engagement psychologically ‘frames’ that act for the person engaging, and there are various forms of metacommunication which shape this framing: mood, performativity or even language (Bateson, 2006).

However, metacommunication can culminate in what Bateson terms “paradoxes of play” where play is signaled, but is not actually occurring – or vice versa (2006, p. 324). It is precisely the occurrence of this paradox that prevents us from being able to ostensibly define play through example. A hockey player might be participating in a game of hockey and following the rules of the game but, psychologically, they may not be playing what philosopher Bernard Suits would refer to as the ‘institution’ of the game (1978). They may be playing by the rules, even playing to win, but the requisite lusory attitude – the mindset which commits them to playing a game for intrinsic purposes – may be absent (Suits, 1978). It could then be argued that Bernard Suits’ ‘lusory attitude’ not only suggests voluntary mindfulness of participation as a requisite of gameplay, but that our own subjective knowledge of the conditions of that participation is requisite as wellⁱⁱ.

This introduces the notion that although players might be partaking in what is the ‘nip’ of play (that activity which denotes play), this ‘nip’ does not necessarily denote what a player actually knows or believes to be play – and yet the cues would indicate that what is taking place is the ‘genuine’ article. A hockey player may only be participating in a game for extrinsic gains. Despite being identifiable as play by a third party, such instrumental aims might or might *not* exclude this process from being called play by the player in question – just as players of massively multiplayer online games cannot entirely agree on whether their ‘level grinding’ is play or work (GW Forums, 2008). Play is as private a phenomenon as it is a shared one, but is not equally discernable between and/or within parties.

As such, defining play here becomes an issue of how we come to know it rather than what it actually is; coming to grips with the multiple subjectivities of the phenomenon, and being able to discern the family resemblances between them. In this way, one might look at those things which we point to when we feel we know we’re witnessing or partaking in play, and then interrogating those signals which act as beacons of that knowledge.

Private Language

Wittgenstein discusses epistemology tangentially in his work, given that his primary focus is on language use and meaning. However, his work addresses other concepts relevant to personally experienced phenomena – most notably the concept of a private language (1953).

A private language, according to Wittgenstein, is a language that can only be comprehended by a single individual, remaining indecipherable by others. Such a language would theoretically be used to express personally experienced phenomena such as pain: something which could be demonstrated to others (for example, witnessing someone stubbing their toe), but could never be co-experienced with them.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein conducts a thought experiment that presupposes that only the person who feels a given pain has authority enough to express that pain accurately (1953). As such, if a person were to record every time they felt pain by writing down a particular symbol in a book based on the relative intensity of that pain, there is no manner in which another person could ever understand what those symbols meant considering that they never experienced the pain in question. This would theoretically make the symbols unintelligible to anyone other than the individual who wrote them.

Wittgenstein disarms the feasibility of this scenario by suggesting that pain is not an absolute: it is a sensation to which one may freely append a symbol and thus, a rule for the application of that symbol. If an individual can append such a rule to that sensation, then any individual can manage to learn the same rule.

In effect then, a private language is an innately flawed concept since such a language is not using a personalized vocabulary to demonstrate the intricacies of a personally held experience as though it were finite and knowable. A state of pain is unknowable as an absolute in either expressible quality or quantity, and therefore the assignment of a symbol to its experience is merely the equivalent of appending a ‘cue’ to it (Wittgenstein, 1953). Such cues can include words like ‘ow’, which indicate that pain has been experienced but can never accurately express the sensation itself. It is Wittgenstein’s assertion that we are trained in particular responsive cues, which we can call on to express something that we communally recognize as pain.

Given that these cues are entirely learnable, the argument made by Wittgenstein is that a private language is effectively impossible. Despite any privately held experiences, these experiences can never be expressed in a language which only bears meaning to the user – such language will always be in the form of cues that are subject to communal mastery (1953). This is not to say that a pain experience is not irrevocably private, or that the internal machinations which result in such experiences are sharable. However, the pivotal question which stems from Wittgenstein’s musings is *how is the knowing of private experiences to be achieved?*

Wittgenstein reflects on ‘cues’ as a method of making proper connections: knowing that when an individual feels pain, that there is a reasonable connection to be made between that and the appropriate, communally acceptable cue. How do we make these connections with play?

Play, Pain and Grammars

With pain, we call on particular cues to express something that we communally recognize as pain – and we do so in a normative fashion through language. Wittgenstein would suggest that we learn to associate these cues as conventional expressions of pain due to our inability to express pain. It is argued here that this is, in many ways, no different from play. According to Williams, pain is “part of a reactive context” (Williams, 1999, p. 30). It is situational, behavioral and psychological. *So is play.*

Play is a privately felt and often publicly experienced phenomenon that we develop ways of coming to communally know, through (although not exclusively) the exchange of linguistic cues. Like Wittgenstein’s conceptualization of pain, play straddles the line between private and public but, as stated by Malaby, play ontologically carries significant metaphysical baggage – we cannot generate a consistent definition as its sensation eludes language altogether (2007).

This calls for a direct emphasis on examining the *use* of language as the site of meaning, not grappling with trying to reduce the sensation of play to a definition. If meaning is rooted in the linguistic exchanges and social practices of a community, as Wittgenstein would suggest, an evaluation of the cues which illustrate the conventionalized and even contested notions of play are of certain utilityⁱⁱⁱ. If cues reside in the social practices of a community, the meaning of play is to be found in these same social practices.

Spontaneous and Normative Grammars

Gramsci’s concepts of ‘spontaneous’ and ‘normative’ grammars are useful in investigating the nature of language, particularly as it pertains to the manner in which communal cues come to be pointed to as ‘play’ in in-game contexts.

To briefly explicate, spontaneous grammars are those constantly emerging grammars of everyday exchange – new rules and modes of linguistic exchange which surface amid the use of traditional normative grammars. Spontaneous grammars emerge and are often taken up as normative grammars by a dominant regime in an effort to re-uphold particular paradigms, either consciously or unconsciously (Gramsci, 1971; Ives, 2004).

Spontaneous grammars encapsulate the cues that emerge in communal contexts: we continually develop our social lexicon through our linguistic exchanges and praxis and, as Gramsci would contend, this lexicon evolves into a normative one (Gramsci, 1971; Ives, 2006). In game terms, there emerges an ostensible consent by players to accept the implicit grammars that permeate a game; a consent which sees a re-appropriation of seemingly self-evident ‘spontaneous’ grammars (such as ‘grinding’ in MMOs) as ‘normative’ ones (Gramsci, 1971, Ives, 2004). Niels Helsloot writes:

Gramsci is in line with Wittgenstein; normativity is not a matter of opinions, but of a form of life [...] Norms and rules develop within a community, parallel to the

political aims the community produces, in other words, to its self-definition. Normative grammar, and the efforts spent in patiently learning it, discipline people [.]

(Helsloot, 1989, p. 557)

At first glance, the manner in which meanings of play are established through Gramsci's notion of 'grammar' may appear insidious in this way through their 'disciplining', but such conventions and their reification are frequently developed and assented to without having been catalyzed by malicious intent on the part of game designers. We accept particular conventions as normative but, as Wittgenstein would state, we do not necessarily agree to the meaning of these conventions because we understand them (1953). This does not mean that normative grammars 'inflict' their meaning upon a naïve herd, it is simply that, "without conventions, we could not understand in the first place" (Smit, 1991, p. 49).

We tend to approach the understanding of a concept as we become exposed to its array of contexts, activities, and the circumstances in which we establish the range of permissible meanings in and among a consensus (Wittgenstein, 1953). In a game context, then, we might visualize Gramsci's concept in the following way:



Figure 1

In the above scenario (*Figure 1*), we can observe a movement from the design of a game, to the development of spontaneous grammars around player engagement with that game, to the calcification of those grammars as normative. This results in the concretization of normative cues in language exchange, cues which themselves become normatively charged. Such cues then become fastened to the paradigm they arose from.

A normative grammar becomes the common language [...] this completes the circle whereby certain phases of spontaneous grammar become legitimated, justified and transformed into normative grammars. The cycle comes full circle in that these formations [...] act continuously on the spontaneous grammars imminent in the language.

(Ives, 2006, p.45)

Cues and Conventions: The Example of Grinding

As previously stated, it is Wittgenstein's argument that we are trained in particular responsive cues, which we can call on to express something that we communally recognize as pain or, in this case, play. Given the above account of Gramsci's grammars, I will employ the following example: grinding in MMOs.

A massively multiplayer online game colloquialism, *grinding* refers to constant, repeated engagement with one or more (often already repetitive) tasks in the context of such games. These tasks are usually undertaken for the acquisition of in-game experience points or in-game virtual goods. Such tasks can require a player to do very little, such as clicking a mouse while remaining stationary, or even adopting the use of a specialized script or macro to automate the given task such that grinding can be conducted while unattended by the 'player'.

There has been significant and well-documented debate among players as to whether grinding qualifies as 'play' or even as an enjoyable game activity as a number of forum and blog posts illustrate (Taylor, 2006; McCrea, 2003). With grinding a now well-sedimented term in MMO discourse, it has come to enter normative grammars not only in-game, but also in exchanges between players in forums and between player and designers (GW Forums, 2008). In an MMO context, one might visualize Gramsci's grammars cycle this way:

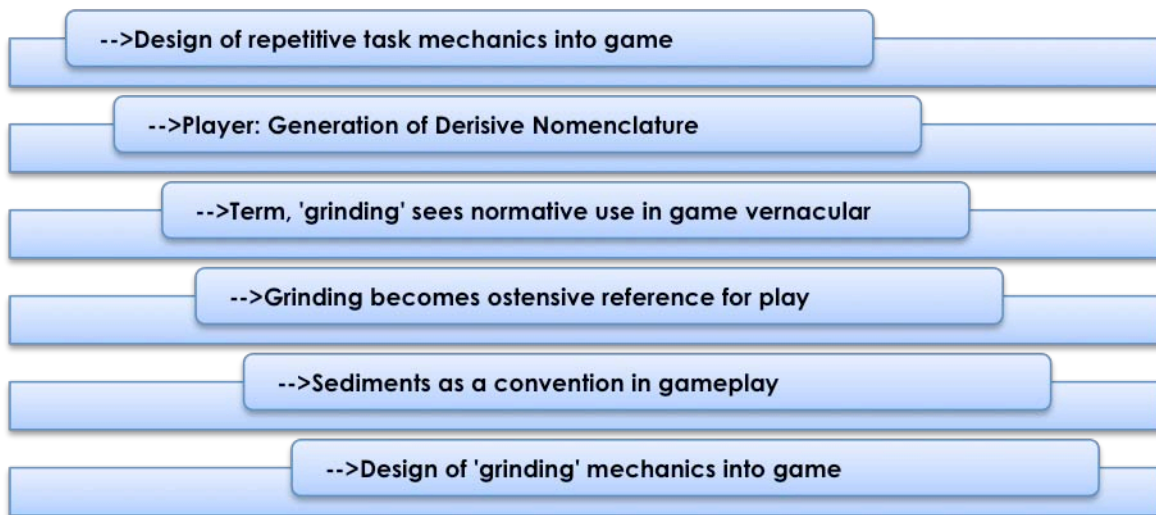


Figure 2

This is not to say that grinding and play have been blindly equated with one another, but only that grinding has become well-established as a normative cue such that even players who do not believe grinding to be representative of what they know as play often need to refer to their notion of play as 'normal play' in forums of public exchange (see *Figure 3*). Such references legitimize the cue.

I had always wanted themed elemental summons for my Ele. The Asura summons are perfect for that. I've been testing them with my SoI Mesmer, and they aren't uber powerful but they are decent skills, and get serious style points for a matching build. So it's off to grind I go. But normal **play**, and turning in both NM and HM Hero's and Dungeons Books will do it nicely with no extra grind needed, so what's the problem?

Most of the EotN skills, for example, are more than useful enough at r5, the last rank you 'need' since it's the last any new content depends on (ie, the racial armors), which isn't at all hard to get from normal **play**. And, of course, there is absolutely no need to 'grind' for rep by filling books (which is too varied an activity, IMHO, to really count as grind) or by abusing that last Cipher quest

There was never any grind in GW for a long time, the titles were just acknowledgment of activities people were already doing. People already did mission + bonus and capped their skills, people already explored and opened chests as well. These early titles were gimmes to people who actually played and didn't get run everywhere. Those who thoroughly played a campaign never had any issue acquiring titles. Even the Luxon/Kursick titles were something players were doing anyway. The consumable titles sweet tooth/drunken/party animal had excessive requirements and broke the mode giving the rich an advantage, however on the flip side it rewarded farming which people did anyway.

When GWEN came out is when they really went astray into the rep grind in ridiculous and was the first time I really had to say the game had went to crap grindwise. The second thing that was horrible was Ursan Blessing it totally broke the game and took what little skill there was in pve and threw it out the window. It totally destroyed the concept of class in pve since everyone is a overpowered bear. So from my point of view the game was fine up till GWEN which added grind for the sake of grind and gave broken skills to speed it along, but grind and its rewards are optional and don't effect normal **play**. The object of guild wars has always been to complete the campaign/expansion by doing all the missions/quests and dungeons and pvp for the endgame so that will never change. Everything else is just gravy.

Figure 3

In such a scenario, grinding begins displacing 'play' in language exchange, by requiring that 'normal play' be at least distinguished from any play associated with the grinding process. Even for those who do not feel grinding to be congruent with their particular epistemology of play, 'grinding' has become a cue which has become firmly planted in the normative exchanges of the community. In this scenario, 'grinding' is pinned down – the center of the discursive constellation around which notions of play begin to orbit.

It should be noted that spontaneous and normative grammars are crucial to evaluating the linguistic dynamic within groups, but the political economic ramifications of this model should not be neglected either. Although this paper focuses on examining play through a lens of language and epistemology, Gramsci would note that changes in grammars around play are reinforced hegemonically (1971). When epistemologies are contributed, shared and consented to by players in ways that aid in re-shaping communal meanings of play (for example, the semiotic metamorphosis which sees grinding begin to 'mean' play within game communities), rhetorical hegemonies around play become expressed through gameplay – a subject for analysis in a later paper. This paper has sought to assume an epistemological lens which hopefully affords how we might understand play differently. Examining why epistemological constructions of play are ideologically scaffolded the way they are is a territory of investigation where Gramsci would surely have more purchase.

Conclusion

Although this work may be an interrogation of past approaches to play, this paper has not been written under the banner of the 'unconditional ought'. It is an attempt to pursue a line of thought that embraces play's amorphous textures while also breaking past the barrier of sufficient reasoning in any determinations about its essential nature. Schopenhauer once said that, in using only sufficient reasoning, "we never reach the inner nature of things, but endlessly pursue phenomena only, moving without end or aim like a squirrel in its wheel" (1990, p. 274). In concordance with the thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein, this work discards the notion that there is

an ‘inner nature’ of play to discover, but it does *aim* to move past the project which has thus far aimed to statically plot and reticulate the notion of play. Instead, this work wishes to evaluate the role of language in development of our knowledges of play. A closer examination of the cues and their contexts permit us a unique perspective on how we construct our knowledges of play in its discursive constellation.

The Private Language argument and its treatment of phenomena such as pain serve as a springboard for looking closely at the sites of these cue exchanges, placing a greater emphasis on the epistemological dimensions of privately experienced phenomena such as play: the knowing of play through communal language exchange and the linguistic textures therein. This may permit us a greater understanding of play, not through defining it but unraveling it for what it is: a contextual tapestry of cues, linguistic exchanges and situated subjective experiences expressed and shaped communally.

Analyses of game worlds (MMOs), for example, which take careful stock of the language used in game design, player exchanges, and cue transactions between player and game might afford new perspectives on what could change genres or allow designers to distinguish between play-types in ways that would encourage design for divergent experiences under the canopy of the same game. Perhaps more to the point, such an analysis would allow developers to better understand their player, and thus their market.

Designers such as Tim Carter and Richard Garriott have already pointed out the importance of language in design, acknowledging problems with nomenclature such as ‘grinding’ and expressing the need to alleviate contentious issues around language and game design through mindful practice (Gamasutra, 2007a & 2007b). An assiduous examination of cues and their exchange is something which could serve to inform the design process in the long term.

One rejoinder to this paper’s argument may be that if we can only speak around a subject like play but never express it directly, what *use* can it possibly be? Although play may be beyond transcendental acquisition, this does not prevent greater or newer understanding of it – this is the lesson that Wittgenstein’s family resemblances embodies. It is not about arriving at an inexorably lacking, albeit well-organized, definition of play – we’ve managed to do that quite efficiently. Instead, this approach embraces acknowledging play as fleetingly discernable through knowledge construction, but nonetheless remaining ontologically indefinable. We all may ‘know’ what play is when we experience it, but its clarity is only in experience, its understanding only through silence. An evaluation of the linguistic currency we use to express play to one another may be what at least permits greater insight to how we come to know something so eminently inexpressible.

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ⁱ Johan Huizinga theorized play as a self-contained spatiotemporal sphere which partitions off the rules and conduct within that space/time from the rest of the world (1950).

ⁱⁱ Any presupposition of intention as a requisite condition of play in this paper is stipulatively applicable insofar as the cognitive intentions required for the establishment of Suits' lusory attitude. For Suits, one needs to intend or will to know the conditions of one's play before willing to enter into it, even if willing to *not* know (or care) is the prerequisite of a type of play which would see one trifling with an existing game's institution (for example, if a person's intention is to ruin a game, they have to first will to at least marginally assess and know its structure before they can attempt to undermine it with their own subversive, personally construed notion of play in that context). This suggests that in order to play, one needs to will to partake in what they have personally construed as that play. Whether it be pre-planned or emergent notions of play, Suits' 'lusory attitude' revolves around the will to construe or knowledge build – and this paper revolves around the manner in which that knowledge building takes place.

ⁱⁱⁱ For purposes of speaking within the framework at hand, cues considered in this paper are restricted largely to the arena of the linguistic, but are certainly not limited to this arena in consideration of the broader applications of this line of thinking. Physical behavior, body language, and so forth, are all relevant constituents that make up the economy of cues discussed in this work.