

***/hide*: The aesthetics of group and solo play**

David Myers

Loyola University
6363 St. Charles Ave.
New Orleans, LA USA 70112
504-865-3430
dmyers@loyno.edu

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I examine differences between individual and social play and, in particular, the differences between individual and social play within digital media forms designed to promote both: massively multi-player online computer games (MMOGs). The analysis considers in most depth differences between group and solo play within the NCSoft's and Cryptic Studios' MMOG, *City of Heroes*.

Based on over 1000 hours of play within *City of Heroes*, observation of online forums and other texts devoted to social activities within *City of Heroes*, and conversations with *City of Heroes* players inside and outside of the game context, the essay describes an antithetical relationship between group and solo computer game play. Conclusions present a semiotic model of play in which game designs promoting social play are ineffective in significantly altering individual play forms and functions.

Keywords

animal play, cognitive play, grief play, play aesthetics, play taxonomy, semiotics, social play

ANIMAL AND HUMAN PLAY

Conventionally, play is divided into three descriptive categories: locomotor play, object play, and social play. These categories originate in the study of animals [5], but are also widely applied to humans – particularly children. Locomotor play involves some physical action or movement without any obvious or immediate goal (e. g., running, leaping, brachiating); object play obviously involves interaction with inanimate objects; and social play is most clearly characterized by the social context in which it takes place and by interactions among players, which that context provides and promotes.

While these categories need not be mutually exclusive, the first two may be thought of as *individual* play and, as such, in contrast to the latter or *social* play. Individual animal play is most often observed as physical activity, and functional theories of animal play stereotypically describe the manner in which individual play contributes to physical growth and development.

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Locomotor play, for instance, has been cited as a catalyst for establishing the ratio of fast and

slow twitch fibers in youthful muscles [2]; and object play (among cats, for instance) has been interpreted as “homologous” to hunting and stalking prey [8].

Animal social play, on the other hand, is less often associated with a physical maturation process and more often associated with the construction and maintenance of social roles and hierarchies. For this reason, animal social play would not aid social development so much as it would impose particular social roles through the implementation and reinforcement of hierarchical relationships.

Social play appears to have a strongly competitive element. Winners and losers of play bouts are often easily distinguishable... and winners may differ from losers in the behaviors that follow. [14], p. 191

This "animalistic" notion of social play has also been applied to human social play by non-development play theorists (cf. [12]), who define social play as primarily competitive or *agonistic*.

In contrast to animal play theory, human play theory is more likely to emphasize mental activities during play and give added importance to the mental states of players. For instance, common functional theories of human play with digital media [11, 7] position play as contributing to (roughly in sequence) the development of physical, mental, and social skills. In such schemes, social skills are an extension of human cognitive skills.

Given these assumptions concerning human play – the importance of mental states during play, the relationship of cognitive skills to social skills, and the educational value of play -- functional theories of human play, when compared to similar theories of animal play, claim less fundamental difference between physical and mental play and, thus, less fundamental difference between individual and social play. Regardless of any formal differences between the two, individual and social play are assumed to have similar *functions*: learning, adapting, and surviving within a natural environment.

The question here is this: Is computer-based social play (i. e., within MMOGs) functionally related to individual play, or is this social play functionally distinct from individual play?

COMPUTER GAME PLAY: INDIVIDUAL PLAY

Historically and stereotypically, computer game play has been characterized, along with most other electronic media use, as isolated and isolating [3, 15] -- and, thus, as *individual* play. However, the social components of computer game play -- particularly online play -- are now well documented [4, 13].

In fact, social play is studied so often in MMOGs that individual play seems relatively ignored and/or absent. Nevertheless, individual play is always present -- and always desired. Here are comments on the matter from Jack Emmert, lead designer of Cryptic Studios' MMOG, *City of Heroes*:

[W]hat does a solo player do in *City of Heroes*?

On the one hand, this is a MMP. I believe that some of the best features of the

game shine when players join forces with other players. On the other hand, I've always believed that part of our game's strength is the ability for a player to log on for a half hour, have fun, then log off. If a mission requires a team up, players spend a lot of time simply organizing. The quick fun element dissipates...

Simply put: if a player wants to do something solo, it should be CHOICE. Teaming shouldn't be required, but rather encouraged.

Jack Emmert, City of Heroes Forum #2070950 - 01/14/05 08:40 PM

City of Heroes is one of a broad class of online games designed to promote social play. However, *City of Heroes* is enjoyed by players who spend a large amount of online time playing alone, or, as Emmert describes it, *solo*.

What are characteristics of this solo play?

Semiotic play

Computer game play requires players to persistently apply and reapply the related cognitive functions of opposition and contextualization to semiotic objects (i. e., signs and symbols) within the game [9]. Within *City of Heroes*, as within most computer games, the first task of the player is to distinguish (i. e., place in opposition) her personal semiotic object(s) -- most often, her *avatar* -- from its surroundings.

Once this basic distinction has been made -- marked by awareness of self and other -- this opposition forms a referential context within which value and meaning might be further assigned. Prior to this distinction, however, no such context is available. Therefore, the first choices made the player -- who am I and who am I not? -- are made with reference to contexts outside those provided by the game.

Costume design

The first set of choices required of *City of Heroes* players concerns their superheroes' characteristics and appearance. In a design borrowed from and structurally similar to offline role-playing game designs (such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, see [10]), beginning players select among superhero character classes (or *archetypes*) and, within each class, among superhero powers available to that class.

This hierarchical process of selecting archetype, then powers within archetypes, then enhancements within powers -- and so forth -- demands an understanding of the oppositional values of archetypes and powers and enhancements. In the beginning, however, with values not yet established by game play (and unavailable in printed form), player selections are made on the basis of pre-existing contexts -- e. g., pre-existing superhero images in fantasy and science-fiction literature.

The result is a great variety of *City of Heroes* superheroes resembling Spiderman, Superman, The Tick, and Mr. Incredible -- among others.

Two important factors work against such simple and straightforward replication, however. The first is the imbedded design of play itself, a cognitive process that must semiotically distinguish self from other prior to the reproduction of other. The second is a design component relatively

unique to *City of Heroes*: its costume creation system.

Within the game, the process of selecting superhero characteristics, powers, and enhancements is separate from that of selecting the superhero's sex, height, weight, costume, and physical appearance. These latter selections, unlike the former, have no direct effect on instrumental game play.

City of Heroes offers players great variety in costume selection -- more so than competing MMOGs, which more often tie avatar appearance and gear to the relative strength or level (or *value*) of that avatar within the game context. Though *City of Heroes* limits certain costume affectations (capac and auras) to specific game experiences and contexts, the game design allows beginning players great latitude in costume creation, making that process prototypical of individual play.

Beginning players choose costumes without reference to any rules or limits other than those mechanical limits that set, for instance, the number of colors or styles of costumes available. And, despite being detached from instrumental game play, costume selection and design is a very popular activity among *City of Heroes* players. And, unlike most other activities in the game, this activity is *necessarily* individual play in that the costume selection screen precludes conversations or interactions with other players.

Semiotic contexts

Individual play during costume selection and design is self-determined and self-motivated. Or, in semiotic terms, this play values the semiotic objects of play (costume elements) within some pre-existing *context of self*. While beginning players frequently replicate pre-existing costume designs within the game (and thus, in sense, *borrow* a sense of self), these same players tend to create multiple characters (or *alts*) with different costumes, change costume designs as soon and as frequently as possible, and, over time, play most often with both characters and costumes quite different from initial creations.

The unique sense of self gained through costume design is the result of an ongoing play process rather than any single selection made or the appearance of any particular costume created. That is, players tend to identify self within the game in terms of their *entire stable of characters* (and costumes) rather than in terms of the fixed characteristics and appearance of a single avatar.

Player signatures posted in the *CoH* message board forums [<https://boards.cityofheroes.com/ubbthreads.php>] indicate this clearly, as this random sample (March 4, 2005) of three signatures shows...

Marut, 50 FF/Rad/PowM Defender - Champion
Panzerjaeger, 35 Fire/Eng Tanker - Champion
Leader of The Earthguard

Champion
Eizo Moonpetal - MA/SR scrapper (50)
Hiro Moonpetal - Ill/Rad controller (29)
Jungle Boogie - Spines/Regen scrapper (2)

Champion:
 Dr. Lazarus (Emp/Psy Def L37)
 Alpha Decay (Rad/Rad Def L50)
 Yu Shin (BS/Inv Scrap L21)
 Dan Gun (Inv/SS Tank L36)

Each of these signatures prioritizes characters selected from a much larger number that have been played and relegated, for the moment, to subsidiary status. These signatures also contain, here and in most cases, reference to the server containing the characters (i. e., “Champion”) and, less frequently, but still quite commonly, reference to the player’s supergroup (e. g., “Marut” is the leader of the supergroup “The Earthguard”).

Individual play within group contexts

Within *City of Heroes*, supergroups function equivalently to guilds, or clans, or similar organizations within other MMOGs. As such, supergroup membership indicates some preference for group play. However, beginning players can (and do) create and maintain a supergroup of just one (themselves) solely in order to access an extra costume change.

Creating a supergroup allows limited revision of the character’s original costume – ostensibly in order to identify members of the same supergroup through similar colors and insignia. However, even among veteran players, supergroup costumes are rarely used for this purpose. More often, the costume revisions provided by supergroup membership are used as a temporary means of modifying an individual player’s original costume and, thus, aiding individual rather than social play.

Costume contests are held in the lower level zones of *City of Heroes*. These events are neither provided for nor supported by in-game rules and are arranged through the initiative of individual players. During these contests, beginning characters vie with one another for “best costume” prizes, awarded by more advanced characters. The decision as to which costume is “best” is at the whim of the advanced character(s), and participation in these contests highlights the pecking order between the high and the low within the social hierarchy of the game.

However, most costumes designed specifically for competitions are used once or twice for this purpose and then discarded. Just as very few players retain their original costume designs, very few players retain a costume designed to accomplish a goal inconsistent with a personal aesthetic or sense of self.

Individual play within *City of Heroes* – using costume play an exemplar – manipulates, arranges, and values game elements (semiotic objects) in a *context of self*. This context must necessarily pre-exist some parts of game play, yet this context is also a significant outcome of game play. Individual play both values and, importantly, *particularizes* self through a recursive process distinguishing self and other.

How is this function of individual play mediated through social play?

COMPUTER GAME PLAY: GROUP PLAY

City of Heroes, like all MMOGs, motivates group play in several ways. One is by providing tasks within the game that are impossible to accomplish individually. Another is by giving

players the freedom to set their own goals. Costume contests, for instance, are examples of player-initiated social play unmotivated by specific game tasks or goals.

For this reason, social play within MMOGs is frequently *non-instrumental* play, much of which takes place entirely outside the game context. *City of Heroes* supergroups maintain independent websites (see http://www.cityofheroes.com/community/fansites_team.html), hold special events (both inside and outside the game), and serve as a means for exchanging personal as well as game-related information. In addition, many supergroups promote role play either antithetical or superfluous to the game's instrumental play.

However, the *City of Heroes* game design strongly motivates instrumental group play as well. Some missions within *City of Heroes* cannot be attempted – much less accomplished -- by a single player. Other missions cannot be accomplished by certain character classes and/or are more easily accomplished, with greater rewards for all, by a group of characters. These missions include the game's optional “task forces,” which are available for both beginning and advanced players, and the crowning achievement of the game reserved for its most advanced characters: the defeat of the amoebic monster Hamidon,

As players advance within the game, instrumental social play – in which players group primarily to achieve in-game goals or rewards -- is much more common than the non-instrumental social play and groups of lower levels. The game's lower levels display a larger mix of player motives, skills, and contexts of self, and, correspondingly, more diverse play. During extended play, group play values are increasingly narrowed and fixed in a semiotic process parallel to how the concept of self is narrowed and fixed during individual play.

For instance, in beginning play, players most often borrow a sense of self in their individual play with costumes. Likewise, in beginning play, players often borrow a sense of community. Player clans, guilds, and supergroups in MMOGs very often reflect real-world ties (wives play with husbands, friends with friends, etc). Eventually, however, players tend to value social groups within the game -- as they value all other semiotic objects -- solely on the basis of play with those objects.

Semiotic contexts

Semiotic contextualization during *City of Heroes* social play takes place within three stages or contexts associated with three distinct groups. These group contexts consist of, in hierarchical order, **a)** pickup groups, **b)** supergroups, and **c)** *supragroups*, such as those required to defeat the Hamidon.

Initially, play within *City of Heroes* -- within the game's tutorial, for instance -- is predominately and purposefully solo play. Yet very soon, pickup groups are sought and valued. These first groups are randomly selected and become a notorious source of frustration -- and ridicule -- among players. Individual play styles, expectations, and values are in conflict inside pickup groups, resulting in player failures, deaths, and dissatisfactions.

Nevertheless, pickup groups remain common at all levels of the game. For, once individual play has identified and distinguished self from other, there is a more common understanding of the relative functions of individual and social play. Pickup groups at advanced levels of the game involve players more likely to share a common sense of self *within the context of the game* and

thus, more able to participate positively in a group play process that otherwise limits, inhibits, or distorts individual play.

Individual play within *City of Heroes* – within all games -- becomes increasingly less novel over time. A group play context then offers the opportunity to play with and within a new context and, thus, to revalue and reinvigorate individual play. This recontextualization, however, comes at a cost.

Group vs. solo play

Motivation for advanced play within *City of Heroes* usually involves either **a)** *recontextualizing* the game within an alternative context of self (e. g., playing another character or *alt* -- which requires, in effect, starting the game over), or **b)** revaluing all game semiotic objects, including self, *outside the game context* (e. g., on Ebay perhaps, or in expectation of future game features not yet implemented -- such as, within *City of Heroes*, player vs. player competitions).

When individual play starts over and/or reorients play contexts, group play is frequently adopted to help achieve these newly minted goals. However, group play also limits and restricts these goals. For instance, many players begin new characters intended solely to contribute to group play. These characters have little to no solo ability within the game, and, thus, these characters remain dependent on grouping throughout their play. As a result, most players do not actually play these characters -- they “play-test” these characters.

This is most evident in power-leveling. During power-leveling, a low-level character is accepted as a member of a high-level group solely in order for that character to benefit from the strongly instrumental play of other characters within the group. During this activity, group values and goals are clearly defined, with very little room for individual play variations and any resulting conflicts.

Thus, this type of group play tends to strongly devalue and diminish individual play. This is most true of the character being power-leveled, but it is also true of the characters doing the power-leveling. The play of these advanced characters is so strongly instrumental and repetitive in its devotion to group goals that the individual play experience becomes more closely associated with work than play.

Play with these power-leveled characters is thereafter totally dependent upon play of the group and, correspondingly, upon values of the group. Any sense (*value*) of self attached to these characters does not exist outside the group play context. Thus, group values do not supplement or extend individual play values -- they tend to substitute for or *replace* those values.

Supergroup vs. superhero

While pickup groups are limited to eight members, supergroups in *City of Heroes* may have up to 75 members. In both cases, the average group size is less – in the case of supergroups, *much* less -- and supergroup members cannot actually play together in groups larger than eight.

Over time, some very large supergroups have flourished within *City of Heroes*. However, supergroups tend to be unstable. Successful supergroups provide a predetermined context for group play, which, ideally, diminishes conflicts among individual players. While it is not difficult to find a pickup group at any level of play, supergroups are preferred insofar as they

provide a consistent context for play, a more predictable context and, theoretically, a more enjoyable context.

Like pickup groups, however, supergroups fail. Play within supergroups -- play within *all* groups -- promotes different values than those associated with individual play. There are number of obligations required of supergroup members that become increasingly restrictive of individual play.

Supergroups, like all similar social groups within MMOGs, contain clearly marked hierarchical structures, with leaders, captains, lieutenants, and so forth. At the high end of this structure, leaders have the ability to invite members, reject members, and promote members within their ranks. And all supergroups beyond the cattle calls of the lower levels require adherence to some set of rules guiding play. These rules might be very rigid or very loose, but membership within supergroups is not given indiscriminately -- and is revoked if and when warranted.

Manipulating semiotic objects within supergroups (i. e., selecting members and their status) is formally similar to the manipulation of semiotic objects in other contexts (e. g., selecting costume elements and design). And, not only is this process similar, but its outcome is similar as well: the distinction of self and other.

For this reason, supergroups establish a clear distinction between in-group and out-of-group play. That is, in-group play creates a self apart from that created through individual play. Yet group play creates a distinction between self and other through the same semiotic process and for the same reasons as individual play. This results in conflicting values of self within the group play context -- particularly for super group leaders, who are most involved in determining and maintaining group values.

The difficulty of incorporating individual play within pickup groups closely parallels the difficulty of incorporating individual *leader* play within supergroups. Establishing common and consensual group values forces large supergroups toward an uneasy compromise between strongly focused instrumental group play (in which group values are clearly distinguished from non-group values, e. g., during power-leveling) and a much freer, less restrictive, and more varied play outside the supergroup context.

For the majority of supergroup members (non-leaders), play within supergroups distorts the natural inclination of play to distinguish between self and other. In place of this distinction, group play substitutes values determined and sustained outside the immediacy of individual play. This results in a distortion of the aesthetics and pleasures of individual play and, over time, a decrease in the enjoyment of that play -- which, in turn, results in the instability and dissolution of supergroups.

While many *City of Heroes* players actively seek and enjoy supergroup play, these players typically enjoy that play **1**) in the same manner and form as individual play, i. e., as social group *leaders* rather than followers, or **2**) by alternating between the values of individual (out-of-group) and social (in-group) play, or **3**) in terms of strongly instrumental, group-oriented game goals (power-leveling), or **4**) in terms of non-instrumental, out-of-game gratifications that the social context otherwise provides (e. g., on the basis of non-game-related and largely predetermined social ties). Each of these incentives for group play maintains important play distinctions -- and

thus *value* distinctions -- between group and individual play.

Supragroups

Group participation and play, more widespread and preferred within supergroups than within pickup groups, undergoes further transformation within *City of Heroes* as players move from well organized supergroups to the larger and more chaotic supragroups of the later stages of the game.

The culminate form of group play within *City of Heroes* is the Hamidon raid, restricted to the game's most advanced characters. While defeating the Hamidon can be accomplished by a single large supergroup, more often, in accordance with game design, the raid is open to all advanced players. Defeating the Hamidon requires fifty or more superheroes, and, on any given night, the raid might include as many as 200 players.

The Hamidon supragroup supports group play values yet, concurrently, provides many opportunities for individual play. Unlike supergroups, the Hamidon supragroup forms on an *ad hoc* basis. Indeed, supragroup characteristics vary more on the basis of individual selection and choice than on the basis of group values and needs. These two characteristics of supragroups – their *immediacy* and their *impermanence* – are much more conducive to individual play than the more rigid, rules-based contexts of supergroups.

Social play within the Hamidon raid includes organizing the raid, forming teams prior to the raid, and broadcasting instructions and guidelines during the course of the raid. A small minority of players conducts these activities; and this same cadre of players is likely to hold leadership positions within each server's many supergroups. For these players, the Hamidon raid is a very similar to the social play of leaders within supergroups.

For the majority of players, however, supragroup raiding is quite different from supergroup play. Social ties and, correspondingly, social *rules* are not so strong or binding as they are within the supergroup context. Players are likely – and, in fact, are encouraged by raid leaders -- to break supergroup affiliations and form more functional teams appropriate to the task at hand. Without clearly defined social roles and with a number of different levels of participation available, players often choose to join the Hamidon raid as individuals and play solo – while still playing in unison with other solo players doing likewise.

This *choice* of play is critical to positioning play during the Hamidon raid as *individual* play. Whereas supergroups impose group values on individual play behaviors, supragroups allow individual players to maintain and assert their own values – even when (quite often) these values are in opposition with one another.

Pickup groups tend to emphasize differences among individual play values; supergroups tend to limit and restrict the function of individual play values through the restriction and sublimation of individual play. Supragroups tend to allow play with *social context as a semiotic object*. That is, within supragroups, players probe, manipulate, and rearrange social play relationships -- and related values -- in a manner typical of individual play.

Griefing the group

One of the more interesting subclasses of individual play – common within all MMOGs -- is

negative, destructive, or *grief* play. Grief play [6] is, in fact, one of the most fundamental forms of *individual* play in that it is defined by and operates in conflict with the shared assumptions and values of groups. It is, by definition, *antisocial* play -- and thus requires a strong and established social setting to enact.

During the Hamidon raid, despite all pleas and threats, grief play is common. Seldom does this play result in the failure of the raid. However, grief play does indeed result in grief: player deaths, delays, and anger.

The leaders of the Hamidon raid, as defenders of group values (as well as those players who suffer directly from grief play) vociferously protest such play. However, grief play is quite typical of individual play in general and, as such, is not an aggressive but a *symbolic* act. That is, the value of grief play, like the value of all play, is not based on any inherent hostility toward others but rather on the aesthetic pleasures of self and individual play. And, therefore, grief play has the same value -- to the individual and the group -- as does individual play.

Much individual play -- grief play or otherwise -- is pejoratively labeled within the social context within which it is in opposition. However this same play, based on the same formal semiotic process, is, under other circumstances, approved, encouraged, and even solicited by that group.

For instance, during the course of MMOG design, all designs undergo some sort of beta-testing procedure in which players are solicited and encouraged to play roughly with, or, in effect, *grief* the system. This process serves a valuable function for designers and subsequent users of the system. While debugging and beta-testing may be possible within a non-playful environment, there is no systematic, tightly structured alternative to large-scale stress testing in which the game design is exposed to free and open play.

Free and individual play with the system provides more extensive and more valuable information about system functions than does more rules-determined (i. e., supergroup-like) play. Individual play is particularly valuable in revealing *unrealized* flaws within the system design and, thus, in revealing implicit system values.

Of course, once beta/stress-testing is deemed complete, previously valued grief play becomes forbidden -- and harshly punished. Yet, this play inevitably continues, regardless of group context. As a result, MMOG designs -- including many *City of Heroes* rules, features, and its entire range of supergroup support mechanisms -- are devoted to promoting "good" play: supportive, cooperative, and socially beneficial. Those features that do the opposite (i. e., provide for competitive, disruptive, and/or socially isolating play) are not as often included, emphasized, or promoted in the game -- nor do they need to be. Players find -- or construct, if necessary -- these features on their own.

For instance, within *City of Heroes*, there is the */hide* command. The */hide* command displays player status as offline and unable to receive messages or engage in social activities. *City of Heroes* players, particularly the game's most advanced players, tend to use the */hide* command more frequently and more enjoyably than they use its contextual opposite, the *seek team* command. This is most true of play within the costume design screens.

The *City of Heroes* costume design interface precludes any access to communication channels,

yet still allows players to be interrupted by an audio signal (a slight beep) indicating an incoming message or “tell.” Players avoid these interruptions by using the */hide* command and therein sustain and preserve the pleasure – the *aesthetic* – of individual play.

CONCLUSIONS

The more you tighten your grip, the more star systems will slip through your fingers.

-- Princess Leia, Star Wars (1977)

Theories that understand social play as an extension of individual play, involving the same mechanisms and accomplishing the same basic functions, fail to acknowledge frequent conflicts between individual and social play. These conflicts within *City of Heroes* result from different experiences and values – different semiotic contexts and *aesthetics* -- associated with individual and group play.

Regardless of context, individual play exhibits similar form and function. Individual play manipulates semiotic objects in order to distinguish between self and other. In this distinction, players create a context of self within which to value semiotic objects and subsequent play. When this recursive *recontextualization* process takes place within a social context, play engages and manipulates that social context as a semiotic object. Thus, play *within* social contexts necessarily involves play *with* social contexts.

This dialectic between individual play (which, upon occasion, *chooses* and *selects* social contexts) and social play (which must necessarily *limit* and *restrict* individual play choices and selections) may be sublimated. However, despite game rules and designs, this dialectic cannot be eliminated without fundamentally altering the most basic semiotic mechanisms and functions of individual play -- which appear intractable.

This is true even when MMOG designs provide tightly structured and rigidly rules-based social contexts for play -- i. e., supergroups. Within *City of Heroes*, individual play within supergroups becomes increasingly mechanical and void of individual play experiences. Over time, this results in supergroup instability and an increase in antisocial play or *griefing*.

Insofar as individual play distinguishes between intrinsic mental states (self) and extrinsic value systems (other), individual play is best understood as a form of mental or cognitive play. Identifying individual play as a cognitive process is consonant with development theories of play. However this cognitive process does not appear to be directed, as many development theories direct it, toward the acquisition of socially beneficial skills.

Rather, individual play functions simply and always as a means to distinguish self and other. Though minimalist in its definition of play functions, this perspective offers significant advantages in explaining the observed and contentious relationship between social and individual play -- a relationship otherwise problematic.

This perspective also provides for consolidation of theories of animal play and human play. Human play theories have traditionally attached value to the social conventions of human play, while animal play theories have devalued the cognitive -- i. e., *intentional* [1] -- components of

play. Conceptualizing play as a cognitive process requires revaluing animal cognitive play and, correspondingly, devaluing the influence of social contexts in determining human play forms, functions, and outcomes.

Indeed, the primary evolutionary function of social play -- including MMOG play -- might well be to serve as catalyst for the development of antisocial play. This antisocial play then promotes a more sophisticated reflection and awareness of self-other distinctions. And this more sophisticated reflection and awareness offers a conceptual link between animal play, human play, and an emergent, human-like self-consciousness.

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