

FMS 321 Lab 1

Portal and Play

Representation and Suggestion

Portal is similar to other meaningful texts, like novels or films, in that it signifies meaning in (at least) two ways: (1) It directly shows us actions, objects, characters, and environments; and (2) It suggests, or evokes, meaning beyond what the text directly tells us, through symbolism, allegory, allusion, and intertextuality. The first category is **representational meaning** and the second category is **evocative meaning**.

For this lab consider how various forms of play occur in *Portal*, either through direct representation or through evocative suggestion. You should also distinguish between two perspectives: your perspective as the player of the game, and the perspective of the player-character, Chell.

For your convenience you can take notes on the following charts. The second chart is inspired by a point Cailliois makes later in *Man, Play, and Games* (see back). He argues that each of the four categories of play has three manifestations: (1) culturally-integrated, institutional forms; (2) socially acceptable but marginal forms; and (3) corrupted forms deemed illegitimate, illegal, or dangerous. I hypothesize that *Portal* either directly represents or suggestively evokes many of these forms, especially when you take into account both the player's perspective and the player-character's perspective.

Lab Procedure

1. Take turns playing *Portal* in groups of three. When you're the observer, take notes about the various kinds of play present, either represented directly or evoked indirectly. When it comes to evocative meaning, allow yourself the freedom to make conceptual leaps and to think associatively.
2. As a group, toss around some ideas about the various forms of play that arise in *Portal*.
3. Outside of class, write up your lab report (400-500 words) in a Google Doc. In your report consider the following questions as starting points for your analysis:
 - a. What forms of play are present in *Portal* but least obvious?
 - b. Are there patterns when it comes to play in *Portal*? What surprises break the patterns, and why?
 - c. What are the most important differences between the representational meanings and evocative meanings of play in *Portal*?
 - d. What are the most important differences between the way the player experiences play and the player-character experiences play in *Portal*?
 - e. Other insights or revelations that occurred to you by looking at *Portal* through the lens of Cailliois?
4. Append legible photos of your notes to the Google Doc. When you're finished, share the document with masample@davidson.edu and be sure to give me commenting privileges.

From Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, p. 54

| AGÔN | <i>Cultural Forms Found at the Margins of the Social Order</i> | <i>Institutional Forms Integrated into Social Life</i> | <i>Corruption</i> |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| (Competition) | Sports | Economic competition Competitive examinations | Violence Will to power Trickery |
| ALEA (Chance) | Lotteries Casinos Hippodromes Pari-mutuels | Speculation on stock market | Superstition Astrology, etc. |
| MIMICRY (Simulation) | Carnival Theater Cinema Hero-worship | Uniforms Ceremonial etiquette | Alienation Split personality |
| ILINX (Vertigo) | Mountain climbing Skiing Tightrope walking Speed | Professions requiring control of vertigo | Alcoholism and drugs |

| | paidia | ludus |
|---------|--------|-------|
| agôn | | |
| alea | | |
| mimicry | | |
| ilinx | | |

| | institutional forms | marginal cultural forms | corrupted or illegitimate forms |
|---------|------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| agôn | | | |
| alea | | | |
| mimicry | | | |
| ilinx | | | |