

Maryann Westfall  
LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice  
**Models and Rhetorics of Play Theory**  
October 4, 2002

An understanding of some of the models with which play has been categorized can help to explain why computer games have evolved the way that they have. One cultural framework for describing play is by ancient and modern concepts of man's place in the universe. Play, categorized as such, can be expressed as one of four types:

- ilinx — represented by disorder, chaos or silliness
- mimicry — described as simulation
- alea — characterized as chance or fate-bound
- agon — characterized as competition

### **Ancient Rhetorics of Play**

Ilinx and mimicry forms of play are rooted in ancient ideas of play. Ilinx is a general silliness or form of play without rules or objective, and represents man's struggle to deal with chaos. With mimicry, on the other hand, man attempts to master his environment by replicating it under his own set of controls and rules. The dominant rhetorics with which these two forms of play are discussed are fate, power, identity and frivolity.

**FATE** — Until the mid-19th century, man had viewed his existence as based on mastery over his environment. Games, then, could be thought of as a means of creating mini-worlds by which man could learn to master his surroundings.

**POWER** — Where a given population has been subjugated by a ruling power, the ruling group believes it necessary to maintain its power by continual reinforcement. By allowing the subordinate groups to play the master's games, the subordinates are given the opportunity to satisfy their need to "vanquish" their "oppressors." The fantasy of overcoming defeat in a game allows them to accept their subordinate position in life.

**IDENTITY** — the results of the contests of power, above, form the identities of a culture. From national identity in an international arena to the identity of a family member, this identity is formed and reinforced through the play of games. Nationalism runs high during the playing of the Olympics, regionalism is prevalent during baseball playoffs, local pride is displayed in games of children's organized sports, even personal identity is developed when siblings compete in games. Many indigenous games were replaced by foreign games in cultures where outside forces claimed power. The game of cricket, for example, became the national game for India, even though it was introduced to that culture only recently in terms of India's multi-millenia history. Thus, games represent the cultural identity of a group as prescribed by the ruling power.

**FRIVOLITY** — [to come].

## **Modern Rhetorics of Play**

Alea and agon are modern models of play. As a result of Darwinism, a new way of analyzing and modeling play became necessary. Thus, the idea of chance outcomes became a strong model known as alea. And the struggle for survival and domination through competition forms agon. As with the ancient ideas of play, the rhetorics of fate, power and identity are important ways to discuss these models of play. In addition, new rhetorics were formed to deal with the newly emerging models: progress, imagination and self.

PROGRESS — [to come].

IMAGINATION — [to come].

SELF — [to come].