

It's Important to be Earnest? The Seriousness of Play in Constructing Group Identity.

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Abstract:

Play is often characterised as something trivial, or, even when its' benefits are acknowledged, as something fleeting and hedonic in nature. In contrast to this, we outline the importance of frivolous play as a means of accessing sacred experience and constructing a shared sense of identity. Three cases are examined, namely the Beamish Brand Community, a White Water Kayaking Club, and the Beer Pong Subculture. In all cases, group rituals help to provide participants with sets of play-ground rules, the observation of which allows them to attain transcendent experience and maintain their group identity.

Introduction and literature review

The re-emergence of Play

Play is often characterised as something trivial. As an activity, it has been frequently denigrated and dismissed (Sutton-Smith 2001). Sutton-Smith credits the Protestant work ethic in particular with the denigration of play as “a waste of time, as idleness, as triviality, and as frivolity” (2001:201).

Sutton-Smith goes on to explore how the development of the industrial society led to this denigration of play. Play was ubiquitous in pre-industrial society. The duality of (irresponsible, frivolous) play versus (sober, responsible) work simply had not arisen. Play was an integral and regular feature of life. However, once the industrial revolution began, the frequency of play conflicted with the efficient organisation of factory work and so play was denigrated, suppressed, trivialised, and to a great extent removed from adult life. This denigration of play was so effective that in fact ‘play’ arguably still has something of a stigma attached to it. Children can legitimately ‘play’ but adults cannot. Sutton-Smith further notes that multiple forms of play are called something else, possibly to avoid embarrassment. In spite of all this, in recent years play for play’s sake seems to be enjoying something of a resurgence. Could there effectively be some deep-rooted need to play, that causes us to break out in playful behaviours? Could alternative, recently emergent forms of leisure such as beer pong have become popular precisely because they help to fulfil a deep-rooted need to play? Why, indeed, do we need to play? What might such deep-rooted needs be?

The Sacred Need to Play

Sutton-Smith cites Huizinga to argue that “play is a most fundamental human function and has permeated all human cultures from the beginning” (2001: 202). For Huizinga (1955:25):

“the apparently quite simple question of what play really is, leads us deep into the problem of the nature and origin of religious concepts”.

This immediately suggests that play is complex in nature, and far from being trivial in purpose, instead has to do with religion and the sacred. Commenting on this complexity, Grayson (1999) observes that it is the vastness and complexity of play that simultaneously makes it irreviewable, but also irresistible to researchers. Grayson proposes an incredibly broad definition of playful consumption, arguing that even being a defendant in a legal dispute can be consumed playfully as an experience. However, while such a broad definition helps to clarify what it means to be playful, the sacred purposes of play are perhaps better explored through examining what happens when people set out to engage in leisure activities.

Huizinga (1955, p.7) says that “play is a voluntary activity... play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it... by this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off” . Huizinga goes on (p.9) to assert that

“(in) not being ordinary life it (play) stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites, indeed it interrupts the appetitive process. It interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there... play presents itself to us as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives”

This defines play as something apart and separate from ordinary life. Such a separate activity requires a separate place for the activity to occur. Huizinga calls this space a “play-ground” and, intriguingly, defines this playground as a “consecrated spot”, a hallowed area “within which special rules obtain”. What is the purpose of these “special rules”? Huizinga (p10/11) argues that

“inside the playground an absolute and peculiar order reigns... play creates order, IS order. Into an imperfect world... it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it ‘spoils the game’, robs it of its character and makes it worthless.”

Thus for Huizinga play has an elevatory character that temporarily lifts us from the mundane realities of an imperfect world. This elevation, or transcendence, can only be maintained if rules are present that enforce it. Some framework is needed in order to ensure that all participants comply with what is required in order to maintain this experience of “limited perfection”. In other words a set of rules is needed in order to ensure that the ‘temporary world’ of play can be sustained:

“All play has its rules. They determine what holds in the temporary world circumscribed by play. The rules of a game are absolutely binding ... as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses. The game is over”

Huizinga argues that the spaces set aside for these ‘play-grounds’ are effectively sacred, so that the tennis court, for instance, is indistinguishable “from the temple or the magic circle”. For Huizinga, play as an activity is nothing less than an echo of the religious rituals of archaic man, rituals which were intended to compel the gods to reproduce the natural order of things. While Huizinga does not conclude that contemporary play is a form of supplication to or worship of the gods, he clearly believes it to be fundamentally sacred in nature.

This sacredness can only be realised through adherence to the rules. The rules provide the framework for a temporary world within which all that counts, are those things that count within the game. Sutton-Smith (2001:182) cites Gadamer (1982) to explain that

“the player doesn’t play the game...it is, rather, that the game plays the player. Once you begin playing, you are taken over by the things that are serious within the game, regardless of how serious that ...game is estimated to be in the eyes of the non-playing world”

The benefit of allowing oneself to be taken over in this way is that the participant can then experience the full pleasure of play:

“... much of the pleasure of playing lies in the fact that the game plays you; that your reactions are more often reflexive or involuntary rather than voluntary; that the game takes you out of yourself. It frees you from one self by binding you to another”

This allows participants to experience flow states (Csikszentmihalyi 2000) by which we understand an experience of transcendence, a feeling of merger between self and activity, and a loss of normal self-consciousness. Being immersed in something for its own sake can thus be understood in terms of there being “no ulterior end” (Holt 1995). Hence Holt’s definition of the autotelic nature of baseball fandom, for instance. This mutual willingness to engage in autotelic activity provides a “common locus for people who often have few other commonalities”. Holt cites Belk *et al* (1989) in noting how group interaction focused on a central icon allows participants to access sacred experience. This collective sacredness could not be maintained were it not for the willingness of the group to subject themselves to the rules. Those who do not keep the rules must therefore be ejected – but Huizinga suggests that they go on to form communities of their own (which may explain how rugby union emerged as a sport in its own right from the more popular sport of association football, for instance).

Huizinga goes on to elaborate on the role of such rules in establishing and preserving a sense of community. Such sets of rules help to establish that “we are different and we do things differently” (*ibid*). The need for such collective feelings of identity and the social usefulness of ‘the rules of the game’ in conveying feelings of community immediately suggests that contemporary play communities, in the form of neotribes (Cova 1997), will be heavily dependent for their ongoing existence on their ability to come up with and adhere to sets of rules that allow them to take their play seriously. Contemporary play communities are thus not engaged in worship of deities but are nonetheless engaged in a mimetic form of religion, whereby access to transcendent states is achieved by playfully adhering to collectively produced sets of rules that safeguard the autotelic nature of the play experience and help to identify authentic members of the community to each other.

In their analysis of contemporary play, it is no coincidence that Kozinets *et al* (2004) draw from Huizinga’s concept of *homo ludens* in their definition of play as ludic consumption. They thus for example note the necessity of “the suspension of disbelief and creation of a separate and self-contained world” to describe the way in which participants enter into a spirit of playfulness. They also refer to the apparent paradox at the heart of Huizinga’s conceptualisation of play, whereby:

“ *play’s imaginative ... free and open elements (are cast) ... against its goal-directed rule-bound nature*”

Moreover, they also question the oft-adopted view in the marketing literature of the marketer as the rule-maker, and the consumer as either a rule-following slave to the marketer, or a dissenter. They suggest that the postmodern consumer literature takes a different view. The postmodern view sees the consumer play in a co-productive and creative way with the resources provided by the marketer. The consumer doesn't dissent from, but rather engages with the marketer. This engagement is not unthinking but rather it is creative, thus marketers should allow consumers latitude for creativity rather than providing an over-prescriptive version of the playful experience:

“(W)here consumers are given large degrees of freedom to create or co-create with organisers, they feel it as authenticity, a type of soulfulness and meaning, and they respond with enthusiasm, energy, and action. Marketers may think that their job is to provide a prepackaged total experience – but consumers must add their dreams, ideals, values, history, meanings, and personalities to these raw ingredients”

Finally, we note that play's transcendent qualities do not preclude it from being potentially competitive as well. To quote Kozinets *et al* (2004):

“Play becomes a competitive activity ... consumers struggle against time and each other, in rituals originally designed – and perhaps still culturally and biologically wired – as placemarkers in time and space”

Huizinga (1955) himself referred to the fact that play could be bloody or even fatal, and we thus note that even non-violent contemporary play can still carry overtones of play as fighting. Play can thus serve to confirm or reinforce status within social hierarchies and competitive play is a manifestation of this.

The Current Study: Three creative play-spaces

We now outline the importance of play in constructing a shared sense of identity through three cases where play-space is collectively created, namely the Beamish Brand Community, a White Water Kayaking Club, and the Beer Pong Subculture. In all cases, ritualised forms of play are central to the construction and maintenance of group identity. The role of ritual in play points to the purpose of play as something not merely autotelic in nature but something with a deeper purpose, that of providing / fulfilling something akin to a religious experience.

We also note that the literature on play partially overlaps with the literature on hedonic consumption (Holbrook *et al* 1984, Hopkinson and Pujari 1999) but by reverting to the term ‘play’ and subsuming pleasure-seeking hedonic consumption into our conceptualisation, we hope to better explore the sacredness of play as a means of understanding the three forms of playful behaviour we now discuss. We firstly provide a brief outline of the ethnographic method used in all three field studies.

Methodology

The Beer Pong Subculture

An ongoing investigation into the beer pong community began when one of the researchers attended his first beer pong tournament. The study began by participating in the World Series of Beer Pong V in Las Vegas Nevada, from Jan 1st to 5th 2010. Attending the WSOBP V allowed for participant and non-participant observation, photography, videography and informal conversations with a vast amount of community members.

Since attending the WSOBP V one of the researchers has become fully immersed in the beer pong community, and continues to conduct participant, non-participant observation, and ‘netnography’ (Kozinets 2002(a)). The investigation into beer pong includes an international aspect as the researcher has immersed himself into the beer pong culture in the USA and the emerging beer pong culture in Ireland.

The Beamish Brand Community

Affiliation with the Beamish brand community, or Beamish Appreciation Guild, began in April 2006, when one of the authors became a member of the group at an emergent stage of community development. This came about via an invitation to take part in the first community event, the inaugural tour of the Beamish Brewery described below. The subsequent realisation that this emergent collective manifested a number of characteristics of brand community (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) led to a decision to carry out an exploratory

study to determine the factors that had led to the formation and evolution of the community. It was decided that to best understand the factors that facilitated the emergence of this brand community a market-orientated ethnographic method (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) combined with elements of netnography (Kozinets 2002(a)) would be implemented.

The study, which consisted of participant observation, long interviews (McCracken 1988), informal conversations, and netnography, began in April 2007 and concluded in April 2008. As such, the netnography therefore incorporated an analysis of all community online content, including content posted from the time of the community's origins in 2006 through to the conclusion of the fieldwork phase of the study. This included examining conversations between members, observing pictorial content, and also viewing video footage available on Bebo and Youtube. The netnography also incorporated active participation as a complete member researcher (Stewart 1998), whereby one of the researchers actively initiated conversations, created quizzes and uploaded photographs, and participated on other members' pages by answering quizzes and commenting on photos.

White Water Kayaking

The white-water kayaking study was originally concerned with the motives for sustained participation in high-risk sport. It was felt that by studying the lived experiences of members of UCC Canoe Club through an ethnographic approach that a holistic understanding of extreme sports consumption could be realised. One of the researchers was already a member of UCC Canoe Club at the outset of the study, while the other researcher acted as a peer debriefer for data analysis. It was considered essential that all aspects of canoe club membership, including social, were incorporated in the research. Veracity was further attained through extending the fieldwork over a two year period. Ten participants were selected for interview using purposive sampling (Stewart 1998) and all data was analysed in the manner recommended by Spiggle (1994). At the time of the study's conclusion, while the hedonic nature of some of the social rituals in particular had been noted, the playfulness of

subculture members was regarded as an important aspect of the reproduction of subcultural values but was not considered as play for its own sake. In retrospect, this was an error which we now address below.

PLAY-GROUND ONE: BEER PONG

Introduction to beer pong

Beer pong has its origins as a drinking game played at frat parties and college dorm rooms throughout the United States. Games that involve drinking alcohol and feasting enjoyed wide appreciation in earlier societies. Beer pong can be compared to and considered a combination of various games played in early Greece, especially the game Kottabos. Kottabos involved throwing wine lees into shallow saucers. The competitor who sank the greatest number was considered victorious and received the prize.

Beer pong normally involves two players per team, an 8ft long table, and ping-pong balls that are thrown into a triangle formation of 10 cups slightly filled with beer on the opposite side of the table. Once a ball is sunk in your opponent's cups, that cup is taken away and the beer drunk. Victory is achieved when all your opponent's cups are taken away. In beer pong distracting your opponent from aiming is allowed, encouraged, and expected. When a competitor is taking a shot, distractions often include so-called 'trash' and 'smack' talk, the wearing of colourful costumes, and trying to upset your opponents' aim by waving limbs or indeed other parts of the body. It is thus as simple as throwing a ball into a cup; however it conforms to the age-old maxim "a minute to learn, a lifetime to master".

Rules of beer pong at parties differ from party to party and from State to State and are emically know as 'house rules'. Beer pong had no official rules until the first World Series of Beer Pong (WSOBP) organised by BPONG.COM/ BPONG in January 2006 (these terms are used interchangeably throughout the study). BPONG.COM are the leading brand in the emerging beer pong subculture. For the first WSOBP they provided a cash prize of \$10,000, and by WSOBP V, the cash prize was an impressive \$50,000. BPONG.COM not only organises the WSOBP, they also merchandise official standardised BPONG tables, balls and

cups, which have not only become synonymous with the WSOBP but beer pong in general. Traditionally American sports include a vast array of specialised equipment. Beer Pogn as played under BPONG.COM rules is no exception. BPONG tables have specific dimensions of 8ft long, 2 ft wide and 27.5 inches tall. BPONG balls are 40mm seamless three star (weight) ping-pong balls. Cups specifications are a top diameter of 3-5/8", base to rim 4-5/8", a bottom diameter of 2-1/4" and a weight of 0.04 oz.

At WSOBP V, 500 teams from all over the United States, Canada, Ireland, Japan, Britain, and Germany converged on the play mecca of Las Vegas to compete for the World Series and the \$50,000 cash prize. The WSOBP V was held in Flamingo Hotel Las Vegas from January 1st-5th. At the WSOBP, teams compete in 12 games on days one and two before the field is narrowed to the top 80 teams on Day 3. Calculation of the top teams is based on their wins and cup differentials from their 12 'prelim' games. The top 80 teams then compete in a double elimination bracket. Players can view their "stats" at the staff table and on big screens around the room.

Creating the play-ground: WSOBP V

The rules of the game are clearly concerned with far more than the rules governing play at the tables. To be in Vegas for WSOBP V was not only to take beer pong seriously but to revere it as sacred. From the moment the participating researcher was accosted while boarding a flight for the last leg of the journey to Vegas, it was obvious that the suspension of disbelief (Kozinets *et al* 2004) was obligatory:

"We heard what we all agreed moments afterwards was the best question we were asked in a long time - "Are you guys going to the World Series?". It was like something from a movie, friendliness, acceptance, a level of camaraderie, it was and always will remain in my mind as the spark that set it all off."

– Fieldnotes WSOBP V

Thus the play-ground is co-created before the tournament even begins. There are effectively two sets of rules that apply at the WSOBP V. The official rules of the game are clearly indicated to all. However, it is the less official rules that help to underpin beer pong's playfulness. These unofficial rules include the obligation to co-participate as fully as possible

in practices of group narcissism to co-create the spectacle (Kozinets 2002(b)). The unofficial rules that ensure everyone enters fully into the game include the requirement for playful dress, playful team names, and friendly acceptance and tolerance of the opposing team's distractions and smack talk.

Establishing the ground rules / Co-creating the carnivalesque play-ground

Play must have a beginning, a specific ritual that separates the mundane world from that of the sacred (Belk *et al.* 1989). It must also have order, rules or guidance (Huizinga 1955). This is no different at the WSOBP V.



Figure 1: The Play-Ground Awaits

“BILLY, SKINNY, and DUNCAN (3 Organisers) started the opening speech at 10.00am on Day 1. They emphasised respecting where you are, whom you are with, and to have fun. It set the tone, the final words before the buzzer to start play went off were “LET’S DO IT”, this was followed by cheers from all in the room.”

– Fieldnotes, WSOBP V



Figure 2: Competition Time - Lets Go!!

Play is serious for players at the WSOBP. Games occasionally get heated as teams are playing for bragging rights, as well as a shot at the title. Teams are often out for revenge after losing a previous battle on the beer pong table. However, there is an unwritten rule within the beer pong community, which ensures that everything that takes place is understood as play and all distraction tactics including ‘smack talk’ are to be taken in good spirit:

“What happens at the table, stays at the table.”

– D____, Informal conversation.

Outside the barriers which mark the table area off from the rest of the hall, a highly convivial atmosphere prevails, balancing the more serious play at the tables. To a huge degree the attraction of beer pong lies in the atmosphere created by both forms of play. The unique mix of fun, competition, and alcohol consumption means you cannot but have fun if you play within both the official and unofficial rules:

“I like to drink beer. I love people. I like competition. I like games where there is no loser. I like to have a good time. I LIKE BEER PONG!”

– P____, Informal conversation, WSOBP

“Its great to get together with friends and compete. Growing up playing sports made me competitive and this is just another way to compete and have fun. Oh yeah and drink!”

–M____, Informal Conversation, WSOBP

Playful dress

“Looking around it was great to have seen people make the effort, many teams had flags, t-shirts, banners, hats, logos, crests, some players were in fancy dress, it was very much a festival of fun and enjoyment. All above were customised to sport team names, beer pong league association, player names, often humours. Also players wore sports gear representing state/city/university/country/locations... it was really fun and players had this sense of representing where they are from, I had it myself.” – Fieldnotes WSOBP V.



Figure 3: Maryland are serious about their beer pong

Team names reflect all the diverse elements of beer pong, be it the drinking aspect, the partying aspect, the rules, the boasting, or the intimidation of opposing teams. Names also use cultural references such as movies or television. At times teams can also have sexist names that are possibly reflective of an unfortunate bias towards certain types of hegemonic masculinity. Teams names at the WSOBP V included: ASK ABOUT US!, Gossip Girl, Wet Ballz, We Own Your Face, and Handful of Ass, to name but a few.

Consumers thus continually develop their own rituals and devise their own props to facilitate enjoyment and the experience of the play-ground. The friendly conversation, story swapping, doing shots of alcohol, trading t-shirts, and other playful rituals combine with the official structures provided by BPONG to enhance the playful experience of the WSOBP. The final unofficial rule seems to be that the play never stops.



Figure 4: Where else can I meet Uncle Sam, Luigi, and a bar owner from Philly?

Ancillary playgrounds.

BPONG cannot control the entire play-ground that is available to pongers, nor do they aim to. Ancillary play-grounds to the main WSOBP ‘tourney’ play area includes the hotel rooms, casinos and bars. When official tournament play is over, players continue to play beer pong. Post official play, beer pong involves room parties. Room parties consist of players drinking beer in excess, friendly beer pong and ‘cash games’. Players keep cash games away from the official tournament. Cash games involve teams playing each other for predetermined sum of money. These games are tense as the sums of money involved range from \$20 to anything up to \$500, but the general the ground rule of what happens at the table stays at the table remains:

“We played a few cash games, KT and I cleaned up..... Myself, Jay and Lazydays, began playing random games, beer pong with bottle tops instead of balls, throwing stuff into my shoe, random games that were just for a laugh, and money of course.” – Fieldnotes WSOBP V



Figure 5: Room parties and cash games

Besides beer pong, Las Vegas is an oasis of play. Pongers participate in the vast forms of play available to them outside of the tourney. It is common to see fellow beer pong players gamble at the casinos tables, and dance, drink and party at the night-clubs. The beer pong community seeks out play and engages with it in all its forms at the WSOBP V, including excessive behaviours that are subsequently leveraged for subcultural capital (Thornton 1995):

“We said to him ‘Man you were wasted last nite, do you not remember running naked through the hotel? He then replied, ‘What, man? I wasn’t naked, I was wearing a shoe.’”

– Fieldnotes WSOBP V.

Co-creating the competitive play-ground

On Day 3, the spirit of hedonic carnival is temporarily subjugated by the emergence of more competitive play. The \$50,000 prize money is on the line. The lesser players, eliminated after Days 1 and 2, revert to a spectator role, providing a backdrop for the serious play and skill of the elite competitors. Alternative forms of subcultural capital earned on Days 1 and 2 through off-table play are firmly relegated as the subcultural capital earned through skill comes to the fore. The professionals are now on view. There is no one in fancy dress throwing on Day 3.

“When entering the tourney, we were hit with a bang. It was totally different on day 3, all the fun and carnival atmosphere was gone, what was left were the serious contenders, those who were here to win, not just party, play and to see what happens. I was in shock. It was like a different place, music was very low and there was a tension in the air. Big TV camera cranes, a feature table with bleachers all around the sides, it was today that this became a real sport” – Fieldnotes, WSOBP V, Day 3



Figure 6: The Final. Tension.

Day 3 is thus a different spectacle. A different essence of play can be seen. Players want the title of WSOBP champion and the substantial prize money. Players on Day 3 all want to

achieve something difficult, to succeed, to experience a release from the tension emanating from the intense competition (Huizinga 1955:10,11). The final day's play was thus completed in a tense atmosphere, in keeping with the community's shared imagination of how a World Series final should be. An ecstatic crowd, spurred on by the announcer and a rousing soundtrack, cheered on the underdog.



Figure 7: 'Smashing Time' win WSOBP for the second year running

Eventually the final was played out and 'Smashing Time' won the World Series for the second year in a row. A different form of play immediately resurfaced in the bleachers as the crowd began chanting "ONE ON ONE, ONE ON ONE...", calling for the members of the winning team to face off against each other. This was the cue for the sense of carnival to re-emerge once the competitive tension of Day 3 had been expunged. We now turn to another carnivalesque play-ground – the zone of the Beamish Tour.

PLAY-GROUND TWO: THE BEAMISH TOUR

Co-creating the Beamish Brand Community Play-Ground

In April 2006 a group of ten university students organised a visit to the Beamish & Crawford brewery during Spring Break. At the time, three of the ten that attended the tour were loyal Beamish drinkers, whose devotion to the brand was such that they could be regarded as ‘brand evangelists’ (Belk and Thurnat 2005). Not all members of the group knew each other, nor were all members of the group regular stout drinkers, much less Beamish drinkers. The official tour of the brewery consisted of watching a short film about how Beamish is made and a brief questions and answers session with a Beamish spokesperson in the Brewery’s Visitors Bar. The closing ceremony of the official Beamish Tour in the brewery is the opportunity to sample Beamish Irish Stout. Also offered is the opportunity to ‘create’ your own pint of Beamish, a task that is usually left to a skilled bar worker. Pouring a pint of stout has a distinct technical process; including the tilting of the glass to 45°, the two-part pour, and the top off. This ritual usually takes several minutes.

An important function of play is its ability to help us to escape the mundane, to play out different roles, and do things out of the ordinary (Huizinga 1955). The opportunity to play with the props, the tap, the glass, to play the bar workers role was considered a magical moment and an opportunity to escape the mundane. On this, the very first tour, an ethos of playfulness was adopted from the outset.

“It was a great feeling (to) pour your own pint, it’s yours. I never worked in a bar, it was fun, the pint was lovely and I can’t wait to do it again” –

B____, informal conversation.



Figure 8: "The perfectly self poured pint"

Members of the community playfully taunted each other about who had the perfectly self-poured pint, while acknowledging the special nature of the venue and the experience:

"...it has a special kind of feeling being there (Beamish Brewery), a buzz." – F____, interview.



Figure 9: Being tricked into not drinking

Ongoing co-creation of the Tour: developing and enforcing the rules of the game

Post the conclusion of the official tour, the group then spontaneously decided to extend their day out by embarking on a 'Beamish Tour' of their own. This consisted of a pub crawl of various pubs in Cork City's centre, with the sole proviso that only pubs that stocked Beamish could be visited. The subsequent desire to re-create this experience gave rise to the birth of the Beamish brand community, the running of further 'Beamish Tours', and the development of a set of highly playful rules for the conducting of the tours and other aspects of group identity and conduct. The purpose of these rules was to re-create the playfulness and transcendence (Belk *et al* 1989) of that first Beamish Tour. The rules are therefore essential mechanisms for facilitating the suspension of disbelief and ensuring re-entry into the playful world of the Beamish Tour. They are playfully enforced in order to ensure that the playground thus re-created is maintained for the duration of the tour.

In the Beamish brand community this is achieved in a number of different ways. One of the ways in which the play-ground is re-created is via the 'Constitution'. The 'Constitution' was created in a capricious manner during the third Beamish tour, and it is enforced on an ongoing basis in an equally playful manner. The "Constitution" states that if a member is intending on drinking alcohol and the pub entered serves Beamish, only Beamish may be ordered. However, the member is free to choose another alcoholic beverage if the pub does not serve Beamish, provided the member complains to at least three people regarding the absence of Beamish.

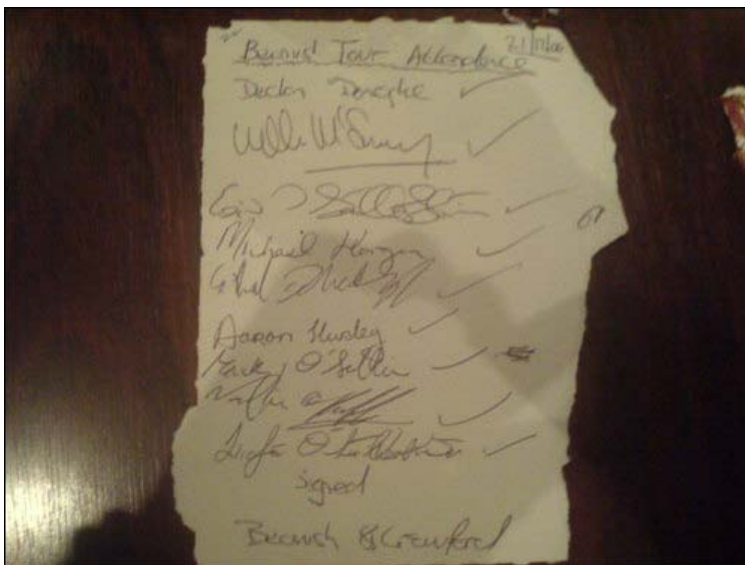


Figure 10: The 'Beamish Constitution' (engineered from an empty cake box)

Enforcement of the Constitution is cloaked in playfulness but is rigorous nonetheless:

“One night L___ was drinking with a group of friends first, when we all met he was drinking Murphy’s and the pub had Beamish. We called him on drinking Murphy’s in front of the President as a punishment he had to buy J___ (The President) a pint of Beamish, When he placed the pint down we all were clapping and cheering, it was so funny. L___ was embarrassed and realised his mistake.”

– Field Notes, December 28th 2007.

The effect of this is to attach a note of gravitas to the ‘game’. It normalises the principle of devotion to Beamish drinking:

“To be honest it was a joke signing the constitution, we were after a few drinks it was all good fun, but when you go into a pub it is in the back of your mind”

– F____, Interview.

While the ‘Constitution’ forms the primary set of rules for the community, there is also a further set of light-hearted guidelines available to the group on how to prepare for a Beamish Tour.

Recommendations for going on a Beamish Tour:

- > don’t wear a light coloured top as there will be spillages*
- > please research beamish as there will be lengthy conversations on beamish*
- > everybody try an look out for B____ as he is prone to injuries. (nutter)*
- > please learn the prayer off... impersonators will be dealt with*
- > do not let F____ sucker you into an argument.*
- > have a good meal prior to tour as we may not have time to stop for food*
- > have a song prepared (B____ exempt)*

– BeamishClub.Bebo.com

Another practice that facilitates suspension of disbelief, and attaches a mock gravitas to proceedings, is the ‘Name Game’. The Beamish Community refer to themselves with a variety of colourful titles, including ‘The Beamish Society’, ‘The Beamish Appreciation Guild’, and ‘The Beamish Club’. In addition, group activity on Bebo has made reference to the ‘Beamish Brigade’ the ‘Beamish Lads’, and ‘Beam Beam Heads’. The most commonly

used name is the ‘BAGS’, this being a play on ‘Wags’ as well as an acronym for the “Beamish Appreciation Guild”.

F_____: We now have the president of our company or what ever we’re called - the Beamish Appreciation Guild.

M_____: Announcing the president of the Beamish Society.

J_____: On behalf of the Beamish Appreciation Guild... if you are not a member of the official Beamish Club on the UCC Page...

(Youtube.com)

By playing with a multitude of names the group not only express their collective sense of idiosyncrasy but they also temporarily suspend the reality of the non-Beamish Tour world.

Ancillary play-grounds

Just as we saw in the Beer Pong subculture, play is extended beyond the central play-space into a variety of ancillary play-grounds. The Beamish brewery as initial play-ground simply served to inspire an ethos of playfulness that continues to evolve and manifest itself in new practices that are at first glance unconnected to the original experience but on reflection arguably have to do with the community’s need to safeguard against habituation (Belk *et al.* 1989) thereby ensuring that the experience of a Beamish Tour retains its novel character and continues to generate a sense of transcendence. The community therefore have a self-proclaimed licence to indulge in a variety of novel hedonic behaviours:

“You can do what you want on a Beamish tour, you could get away with murder...ha”. – L_____, (Fieldnotes).

On one particular Beamish tour each member ritually consumed snuff in each pub visited (snuff is a menthol tobacco that can either be sniffed or inserted in pinches between the gum and inside of the upper lip.)

“It wasn’t nice but we done it all day, I think I got a pain in my head from it but it was funny, only for the tour that day I’d have never done it”

– ‘F_____’ describes his snuff-taking experiences (Interview data).

On another Beamish Tour, members smoked cigars at every pub that had a smoking room, despite the fact that every member present was usually a strict non-smoker. Another playful innovation was the spontaneous introduction on one particular tour of a ‘Beamish Prayer’ before consumption of the beer began. The chanting of the prayer was accompanied by giggling and laughter, and a round of applause and cheers greeted its’ conclusion:

Oh Beamish conceived without sin,

Blessed are we, who are conceived to thee,

Beam, beam, Beamish,

Drink, drink, Beamish,

Oh how we love the Beamish,

Hallelujah, hallelujah,

El Beamo, El Beamo,

Hallelujah, hallelujah.

Amen.

Further evolution of the ‘Beamish Tour’:

Beamish tours have evolved and been redefined since the original tours. Members now consider a Beamish tour as anytime the group meets for Beamish consumption. While the visiting of the brewery is no longer a necessity to or a prerequisite of a Beamish Tour, it remains respected as the primary playground:

“Originally we started in the brewery, but people can’t make it on Thursdays and its not open on Saturdays, so a tour now is just when we are all together drinking Beamish”

–B____, Interview.

Over time, the playful rituals and traditions of the group have progressively evolved as have their play-grounds. The pubs visited are old-fashioned, traditional pubs. The pubs chosen for the tours thus represent a contradistinction to the mundane pubs more frequently visited by the group in non-Beamish time. Separating more frequently visited pubs from the Beamish experience maintains the sacredness of the Beamish Tour:

“We wouldn’t really visit the pubs that we do on Beamish tours at a typical weekend, they are associated with Beamish Tours and the laugh we’ve had there, if we went to them on a Saturday night then it would be the same old stuff, the Beamish tour wouldn’t be different.”

– B____, interview.

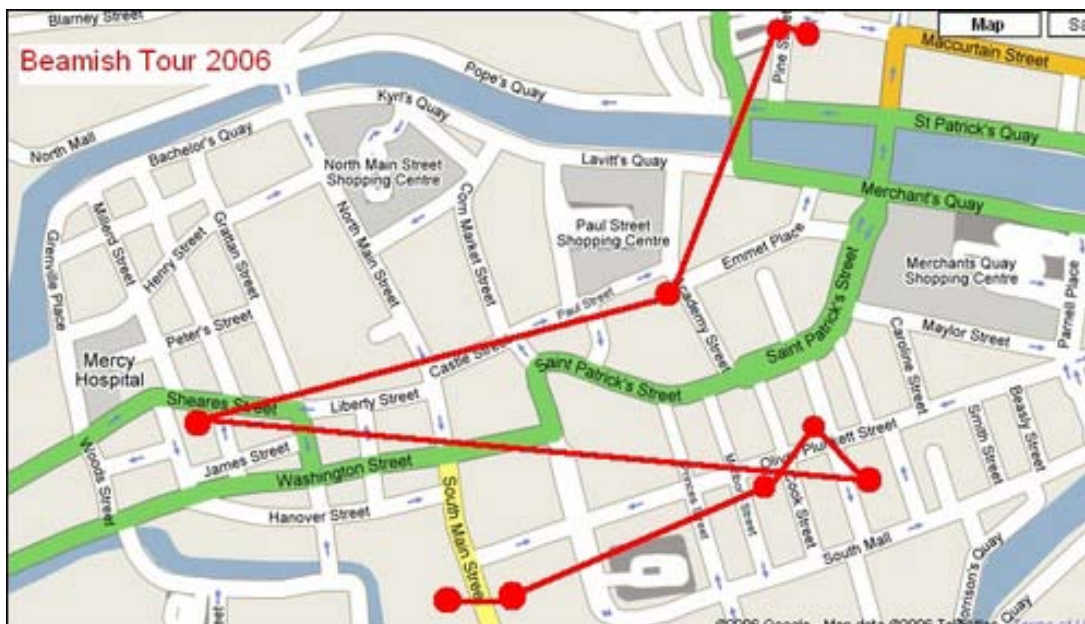


Figure 11: The route of the first Beamish Tour as uploaded on Bebo

These ancillary play-grounds allow the Beamish brand community to portray their meaning of the Beamish brand to others and this also allows others to engage in the community-play. By including a wider set of play-grounds they have a number of props and people to include in the experience of the Beamish Tour.

Different myths, stories, and backdrops for ongoing Beamish-related play have therefore been created from such experiences as the ‘Bar-woman of the Day’ incident in An Bodhran, meeting with the ‘characters’ (some of the regular customers) in the Hi-B, and the night of the sing-song in Cashman’s (another of the old-fashioned pubs typical of those visited on a tour). These diverse experiences and play-grounds allow the Beamish brand community to add to their collective understanding of the meaning of a Beamish tour, to re-create their sense of play, and to renew their sense of identity as a play-community.

We now move to consider our third play-ground, the case of the white-water kayaking subculture.

PLAY-GROUND THREE: WHITE-WATER KAYAKING

The River as kratophanous play-ground

We note in the first instance that the most explicitly and obviously sacred ‘play-ground’ in the context of white-water kayaking is the river (or rivers) itself. The river is a ‘consecrated spot... within which special rules obtain’(Huizinga, *ibid*). We further note that one of the most significant of the river’s sacred properties is that of kratophany (Belk *et al* 1989), by which we understand the potentially terrible power of the river to inflict harm on the unwary. Anything sacred elicits both strong approach and avoidance tendencies and this ambivalence creates an overwhelming power, the manifestation of which is called kratophany (Belk *et al* 1989). Kratophanous objects or persons are approached with care. While they can bestow beneficence, they are also to be feared, given their perceived capacity to unleash punishment on transgressors:

“I suppose for me the scariest one was when I burst my eardrum in Africa. I came over a waterfall (Lower Moemba Falls) but messed up my line. I was supposed to boof but I ended up going deep, really deep. I missed my line and on that drop missing your line had consequences, and I knew that before I got on. My ear popped with the water pressure and it also messed up my balance. When I rolled up I was completely disorientated and kept capsizing. I managed to make it to the bank and my balance came back. While the injury wasn't too bad I was pretty freaked out.”

R_____ (M, 26)



Figure 12: The kratophanous power of the River

In this at times life or death context, adherence to the rules of the game takes on a more serious overtone. However, the behaviour of the paddlers demonstrates that even serious

purposes can be playfully achieved, allowing paddlers to enjoy states of transcendence, ecstasy and flow (Belk *et al* 1989, Csikzentmihalyi 2000):

“When we were doing the S-bend in the Alps I had an amazing feeling going down that section. I had been very nervous when I saw people walking the section, and I doubted myself for a second, but then the others just encouraged me to go for it so I did. I started paddling like mad and as I got to the section I just suddenly stopped feeling nervous. I was just totally in the zone for a while. I just went for it; it was like my brain stopped talking for a minute, while my body took over. It was an incredible feeling, and it got me through it. Afterwards I was on air. I was delighted with myself.”

D_____ (Male, interview data)

This flow experience includes a loss of self, a feeling of being in control of self and environment, and an autotelic aspect such that the activity is its own reward (Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Belk *et al* 1989). However, the enjoyment of paddling and the achievement of flow are only possible when all the other rules of the game are obeyed in full.

Co-creating the paddling experience: initiation into the rules of the game

The most important rule in this context is one of immediate deference to the ‘oldies’, that is, the most experienced paddlers who effectively lead the tribe. During the research, traits of dominance and assertiveness appeared in the senior paddlers on many occasions. In extreme conditions on a turbulent river, it can be deemed necessary for leaders to take active control of the group and shout orders at the less experienced paddlers, who are expected to follow these orders immediately. Assertive, even aggressive behaviour was therefore deemed not only acceptable but mandatory among the group leaders:

“You’d be surprised how people can change on the water. It’s not that they come over all sensible, it’s just that they have the cop on to know that politely asking someone “could you please get into that eddy now” doesn’t have that same effect as “GET INTO THAT EDDY NOW!! PADDLE PADDLE!!!!” We

have a phrase in the club that we like to shout, its “PANIC FASTER!!!” It usually gets people moving if they’re about to get themselves killed.”

R___ (Male, interview data)

This ground rule does not of itself appear particularly playful. However, it is part of a wider theme of the reproduction of social hierarchy among the group. Playful rituals are used both on and off the water to reproduce the subcultural ground rule of deference to the ‘oldies’.

A number of initiation rituals exist to ensure that new members of the group are trained to defer to the oldies. All are highly playful, and all are designed to separate novice members with potential for full membership of the subculture from those novices who are unsuitable for the group. The rituals are used to show people how the club works partly by exposing them to the sense of humour that exists amongst the group but also to draw their attention to the sort of experiences that they can expect to have on a river. By subjecting the ‘freshers’ to these tests, albeit (crucially) in a safe environment (as seen in the picture below), their ability to cope with shock is tested.



Figure 13: Ritual initiation

Freshers are usually subjected to their first initiations in pool sessions. ‘Washing machining’ involves two swimmers catching a fresher off guard in a pool session and turning his/her boat over and over in the water. This actually imitates what happens if a paddler doesn’t “edge”

the correct way while in a ‘hole’ (a retentive wave capable of stopping and holding a kayak) on the river. It is a particularly nasty incident to experience in reality and ‘washing machining’ is the best way to show freshers what can happen to an unwary paddler:

“The washing machining people in (the) pool, turning people around and around, is probably another one. They did that to Fintin the other night. He lasted a good while. But when we lifted him out of the water and held him in the air he just got out of there.”

R_____ (Male, interview data)

This allows freshers to experience the shock of ‘washing machining’ in relative safety so that if it happens to them on a river they will be less prone to panic. Another similar act is the ‘Baptism’. Again this happens in the pool and a fresher is lifted without warning and held in the air while upside down in their boat until either they give in and pull their deck open to land suddenly in the water, or else those involved in the dunking let the fresher go:

“Well I never got baptised, thank God, but ah (laughs) somehow I managed to escape it, but basically ... what happens is we’re either trying to teach you how to brace or do something and we capsize you, and there’ll be two people at either end of the boat, and they’ll lift you up and out of the water, so you do get to breathe, but they just kind of dunk you a couple of times into the water and then flick you back over, or else you swim.”

H_____ (F, interview data)

Jacks Weekend

One of the main social events of the year is ‘Jacks’ weekend. ‘Jacks’ weekend is the first weekend away of the year and is used as a way to get to know new members. It is also a weekend of non-stop initiations for freshers. They are subjected to two nights of social bonding with usually one river trip thrown into the schedule:

“Well Jacks weekend is all one big initiation really isn’t it? Up ‘til then all the freshers blend into one but it’s only after that you’d start to get a feel for who’s who.”

R_____ (F, interview data)

The weekend begins with club members meeting in the local pub for a few pints before boarding the bus and heading off to Kerry for the weekend. The fun begins immediately:

“The party continues until 3a.m., most freshers, most particularly the girls, go to bed but everyone else waits downstairs. When the freshers are sleeping all those awake go up to the dorm and wake everyone up for a game of rafters racing. The freshers, exhausted, look confused at this latest development. This game involves two competitors racing each other across bed bunks holding onto the roof rafters only. The beds are parallel to each other and the competitors must pass each other at some stage to finish the race. This involves biting, kicking and a lot of dirty tactics. The older club members start the game, with a thirty year old oldie, ‘Jim’ on commentary. The freshers enjoy the game; they mostly look astonished and a little wary, but are quickly involved in it.”

(Jacks Weekend Field notes 2006)



Figure 14: Rafter Racing on Jacks Weekend

The mock-punishment continues the next morning when the exhausted freshers are hunted out of bed for breakfast and a hard day's paddling:

“So after breakfast F_____ visits every cottage to load freshers onto the bus for the river trip. Lots beg him to let them stay but he shows no mercy saying, “If you come back next year you can skip it, but freshers have to try everything once.””

(Jacks Weekend Field notes 2007)

The Consumption of ‘Jungle Juice’

Another important ritual, not only on Jacks Weekend, but on two other occasions during the year, is the preparation and consumption of ‘Jungle Juice’.



Figure 15 The sacred ritual of Jungle Juice

The consumption of Jungle Juice firstly involves the secret preparation of the drink away from prying eyes. The recipe is handed down from Captain to Captain and is withheld from all junior members of the club. To take part in the Jungle Juice ritual, everyone gathers around in a circle. The drink is presented in a blue barrel that has been used for decades. The older members usually fill their glasses first while the younger members hold back, watching. A jug is placed by the barrel and this is used to fill the glasses. To spill a drop is regarded as a sin. Everyone watches the refilling of the jug and ensures that glasses are filled over the barrel so nothing is wasted.

The importance of adherence to the rules is illustrated by an incident that took place towards the end of the study, when some of the younger members of the group challenged the normal sequence of the ritual.

“We are gathered around the Jungle Juice barrel. Eager faces are glowing in the campfire light; the eerie illumination seems to enhance the mood of expectation. There is a hush as a circle forms around the barrel, but the circle almost has another more meaningful purpose... to keep non club members out.

Just as we are ready to receive our sacred drink something unusual happens.

M_____ takes out a night light and shouts “Let’s put it in the JJ! It’ll look class!”

The younger members of the club start shouting “Yeah do it!”

Immediately the older members step forward.

“No way. Not a hope!”

“You can’t do that to JJ. Nothing ever goes into it.”

“That’s a sin, you can’t touch it!”

F_____ moves towards the barrel and stands over it, protecting it. He begins to give a speech/warning to anyone who dares put the light into the JJ. He lists off the consequences of what will happen to anyone who “touches” the juice and the ways in which he/she will die. This is met with laughter but not one person touches the light, and normality is restored to the ritual.”

(Fieldnotes, Easky, June 07)

This experience shows how the older members of the club resisted the change that younger members had suggested. The idea was simply rejected from the start and no further resistance was attempted. What this also shows is how the younger members defer to the oldies even off the water, when drunk. The oldies are instantly obeyed, just like they would be on the water, confirming the rigid manner in which the club’s subcultural hierarchy is maintained. Rook (1985) suggests that

“variation in content or sequence (of rituals) may arise, but it tends to do so slowly and is often met with considerable resistance. In this respect, rituals are similar to behavioural habits and customs.”

All these initiations are therefore used to prepare people to expect the unexpected, to enhance their ability to compose themselves, or at least to automatically follow safety instructions, in the sort of terrifying situations they may encounter on the river. These rituals thus help to normalise and manage risk taking, thereby reproducing group norms in relation to perceived risk (Brannigan and McDougall 1983, Celsi *et al* 1993). The oldies’ prophetic charisma (Belk

et al 1989) reassures the younger paddlers and consequently they not only obey the oldies, but they trust them implicitly. This trust acts as an external, charismatic source of courage the freshers can draw from, allowing them to overcome their fears and maintain their pursuit of peak adventure (Priest 1992). Ultimately the purpose of the rituals is not so much to encourage deference to the oldies or to reproduce group norms but rather to facilitate the ongoing autotelic enjoyment of extreme play for its own sake. Yet again, therefore, this is another adoption of an agreed set of rules so that play can be taken seriously.

EMERGENCE OF GROUP IDENTITY

A further potent effect of this collective engagement in play is the tightly-knit nature of the group that emerges from it. While this manifested itself in terms of a tribal dress/ appearance code, it also manifested itself in other highly outlandish and playful behaviours, indicative of the tightly knit relationships within the group. While many of the male paddlers preferred to sport beards and shaggy hair, the female paddlers too showed their own way of conforming to the appearance code. They rarely wore make-up to social events, and if they did choose to wear make-up, they often tried to deny they had done so:

“There’s no point wearing make up in this club. Like, the boys will just lick it off us anyway, and usually if we go out we’ve just come off a river so we look a state anyway and it’s late so why bother, and also sure it’s just the lads. They’re used to seeing us looking our worst and they still like us anyway so why go to the hassle of doing ourselves up!”

E_____ (Female, interview data)

While the idea of tribal members licking each other may sound a bit disquieting, licking of itself has long been recognised as a possession ritual (Belk 1988). Licking is one of the initiation techniques (used, incidentally, by both male and female paddlers) to incorporate ‘freshers’ into the tribe. Ultimately what we therefore see with this group, as with the others we have studied, is a clear relationship between play and group identity.

Discussion: The Seriousness of Play

We have examined three different sites, or play-grounds, all of which are characterised by uninhibited, spontaneous play. At the outset of this paper we noted that play is something that has been greatly denigrated and dismissed as frivolous and childish in nature (Sutton-Smith 2001). However, as we have seen in the context we have studied, the urge to play is irrepressible. This urge to play expresses itself through not only the staid, formal forms of play deemed reasonably acceptable for adults, but increasingly through overtly hedonic forms of frivolous, apparently foolish or even foolhardy forms of play.

We believe that this irrepressibility of frivolity confirms that we are effectively hard-wired to play (Sherry *et al* 2007). The play-drive is not to be suppressed. However for the play-drive to be enjoyed repeatedly, play-tribes of consumers must ensure that the rules of the game are ritually obeyed.

We observed strict obeisance to the unwritten rules of Beer Pong in the manner in which participants in WSOBP V willingly dressed themselves in wacky costumes, came up with ridiculous names for their teams, engaged in ‘smack talk’ and other distraction tactics, and collectively accepted the dictat that “what goes at the table, stays at the table”. By collectively entering into a tacit agreement to engage in silly behaviours these consumers are accessing another plane. They can mime spear throwing and experience mimetic excitement (Elias and Dunning 1986). They can thus re-enact and hence re-experience the excitement of the hunt (Morris 2002). Why? Because they have taken play seriously.

Participants in the Beamish Appreciation Guild willingly subjected themselves to the whimsical rules contained in the Beamish Constitution and the many, apparently silly statutes introduced since the constitution was drafted. This allows them to experience not only the transcendent pleasures of uninhibited hedonic play but also to preserve a shared sense of identity in a postmodern society filled with potentially destabilising uncertainties (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998).

Finally, members of the white-water kayaking community deferred immediately to the many ritual humiliations inflicted on them by the senior paddlers, or ‘oldies’. In this last case we believe that this deference constitutes a major component of the normalisation of risky

behaviour within the group, thereby facilitating ongoing access to the sacred experience of white-water kayaking.

We believe that all the above cases constitute evidence that while play can certainly be spontaneous it is always seriously in earnest. The rules of the game effectively govern the manner in which even spontaneous play is practiced. This ensures, as Huizinga suggested, that “order absolute and supreme” is conserved and hence the sacredness of the play-ground is maintained.

It is also important to clarify that while play is something that is set apart, the play-ground is not confined to a physical space. Play can take place anywhere that two or more members of a play-group are together, be that in a virtual or real-world context. We hope to further explore the significance of such virtual ‘e-Play’ for the beer pong subculture in future research. In the interim we note that in the weeks following WSOBP V, ‘e-play’ continued as a form of sacralisation maintenance (Belk *et al* 1989) for the virtual re-enactment of WSOBP V. The BPONG.COM forum and Facebook became the new play-ground for the beer pong community. Thus, thanks to advances in technology play is no longer bound to time and place. Play can be re-created and the WSOBP V can be re-played online until the community meets again for WSOBP VI.

In conclusion, we fully acknowledge that ours is not a complete conceptualisation of play. We have omitted many of the possibilities to which Sutton-Smith (2001) refers, for instance, such as passive and vicarious forms of play, play as existential optimism, and so on. We also acknowledge that in focusing on the liberatory qualities of communal frivolity, we have not given adequate consideration to competitive play, even though we have observed competitive behaviours. However we fully intend to address this omission in future research.

Finally, we agree that play can function as a way of resolving everyday existential angst (Sutton-Smith 2001), and we also agree that just as the traditional knave, fool, or trickster inverted the seriousness of life, that everyone can play the fool and in so doing experience the liberating feelings frivolity bestows:

“perhaps the spirit of playfulness, never entirely foreign to all kinds of serious play, is ultimately the guarantee that all forms of play potentially promise that one can never

quite lose while still at play... the greater the frivolity, the greater the transcendence of the common writ” (Sutton-Smith 2001:212)

Huizinga (1955:12) originally suggested that playful experience can be preserved and hence magical experience repeated:

“A play-community tends to become permanent even after the game is over.... It maintains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game”

We agree that play-communities can become permanent and that the play-ground can be maintained through mutual construction of and obeisance to the rules of the game. However for playful experience and play-identity to be successfully reproduced there must also be a willingness to co-participate in acts of reification. Symbols of tribal identity that embody the game’s rules are necessary, if frivolous behaviour is to be repeated and transcendent experience re-accessed (Belk *et al* 1989).

Therefore it is not only in holding the rules in earnest that the tribe can continue to collectively enjoy their play-ground and perpetuate their sense of identity. They also need tangible representations of this identity, such as beer pong tables and costumes, written-down constitutions of the rules of Beamish Appreciation, or a carefully maintained mutual code of unkemptness in the case of the paddlers, to give reification to the shared spirit of frivolity. These representations can correctly be considered as variations of tribal mask that allow members to display their identity (Cova 1997, Cova and Cova 2002). After all, it is important to not only be earnest, but to be able to show tangible signs that you are indeed Earnest (Wilde, 1895).

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