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Play as a Method

Miguel Sicart

This article argues that play can function as a legitimate epistemological method: a structured way of generating new knowledge about the world. Drawing on anarchist theory, feminist philosophy, and Science and Technology Studies, the author develops a theory of play as a free, relational, and performative engagement with the world that produces knowledge not through representation but through enactment. Play, in this framework, is characterized by voluntary rule adoption, world-appropriation, and the blurring of boundaries to reveal what is possible rather than merely what is. This argument is grounded in a concrete case study: Probably Not, an iOS application that exploits the statistical uncertainty of machine vision systems to generate critical insight into how AI 'sees.' The app demonstrates how a playful method can contribute to critical technology studies by making hidden assumptions in machine learning visible through humorous, rule-breaking interaction. The article positions play as an epistemology of the liminal, the temporary, and the possible.

Keywords: critical technology studies, epistemology, method assemblage, machine vision, play

I may be unhealthily obsessed with how computers 'see' the world. To me, it is fascinating that there is a branch of computer science that works on algorithms and software that can translate visual data into computable data. How can my car understand how to park itself? Why does my phone recognize my face? My obsession has led me to write quite a few applications, more toyful than useful, that have helped me understand how machine vision works and what kind of sociocultural implications emerge from having computers look at the world. With *Tastegram*,[1] I created an app that delegates the decision about a picture's quality to a machine-learning-trained taste model—that is, a Machine Learning model trained to be a judge of taste in images, using corpora from Instagram as well as from museums. In *Existential Check*,[2] I use a model trained on data from *thispersondoesnotexist.com* to let users take selfies and check whether they exist, which intends to be a joke about how, in the era of visual social media, *we selfie therefore we are*. Neither of these apps solves any problems, but they are useful for thinking about the relationship between software, artificial intelligence, and our culture. Making them, and probably also using them, are ways of making sense of phenomena. It is, in other words, creating knowledge, a process of revealing novel understandings about phenomena that can be communicated, in this case through ridiculous software. Was there a method to that madness? Or was it just playing around?

Understanding the nature of play has been a key topic in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and biology for the past two hundred

years. Play has been described as the source of culture, an activity shared across species, a way to build communities and maintain solidarity among individuals, a form of entertainment and comfort, and a means of creating disorder, chaos, and social and cultural harm. Playing can be viewed as leisure, a method of learning, or a way of representing and communicating the world. Although there are similarities in various definitions of play, scholars who study play agree only on its ambiguity. This makes it essential to be cautious when describing our approaches to play, recognizing that when we use the term 'play,' we must clarify the type of activity we refer to. Novel theoretical claims should be carefully examined, as they are often not as new as we might assume.

Here be dragons: I present one such theoretical novelty in this article. I argue that play can be understood as a method, an epistemological process that produces new knowledge. Playing can therefore be structured as a method for exploring and answering research questions. This paper outlines the epistemological capabilities of play and how these capabilities can be central to formulating a method. I draw on the concept of method that John Law (2004) proposes in his reflections on methodology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Andrew Pickering's (2010) work on cybernetics. I will define the method of play as a type of method assemblage that derives its epistemological results from being performative and relational, rather than representational. The method of play is therefore analogous to the non-modern project of British cyberneticists (Pickering, 2002) and related to feminist, postmodern, and new materialist modes of engaging with the world (Coole & Frost, 2010; Haraway, 2016a, 2016b).

What does all of this mean? Essentially, playing is always a messy relation between people, rules, contexts, and intentions. Whether we are playing a game, playing with a toy, or having joyful sex, play is always a mess. From that mess, sometimes we discover new things about us, others, or the world. In this article, I argue that we can embrace this mess because it is related to the mess of method in social sciences (Law, 2004), and we can use that messiness to formulate new knowledge about sociotechnical phenomena.

The play and game studies communities have already discussed the idea that play can generate knowledge. Johan Huizinga (1971) states that play creates culture through expressions such as poetry, war, and games. Roger Caillois (2001) is less aspirational, arguing that play does have a role in shaping worlds that are part of culture, but not necessarily in the origin of culture. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) identifies at least two viewpoints: Play as Progress and Play as the Imaginary, which produce novelty through innovation (the Imaginary) or as part of a child's developmental process (Progress). Education research aligned with Jean Piaget's (1997) framework recognizes play as a key method for children to learn about and navigate their environments in structured settings.

However, none of these works considers what type of knowledge play may create, or how that epistemological capability could be used to create new knowledge. Even in the tradition of play and education, the activity

is seen as a vehicle for transmitting already existing knowledge, rather than creating new knowledge.

In game studies, there is also a tradition of questioning how play can be a form of creating knowledge (Hunsinger, 2021; James, 2021; Karppi & Sotamaa, 2012; Kücklich, 2007; Leorke, 2025; Linde, 2021; van Vught & Glas, 2018). The idea of play and playfulness that informs these works is slightly different from the one I am presenting here. Some of these works focus on how playing a game can be an act of interpretation and, thus, of knowledge generation. The common aspect of these works is that play can be analogous to humanistic hermeneutic methods, serving to validate the kind of knowledge produced in game studies. Other works examine how higher education practices can be seen as, or can benefit from, being more playful. Unlike these works, my idea of play as a method is limited neither to games nor to the context of higher education practices. My central case study in this article will be an iOS application, a manifestation of my obsession with machine vision that is probably not a game. Play, as a method, is a messy way of dealing with the mess of the world, extracting some knowledge by embracing, appropriating, and manipulating that world, for fun.

To do so, I will start by outlining a definition of play that will let me relate playing to creating knowledge. I will draw on María Lugones (1987) as the primary source for understanding play as epistemology, complementing it with contributions from postmodern philosophy (Haraway, 2016a) and anarchist theory (Graeber, 2014, 2016). I will illustrate this idea through *Probably Not,*[3] an app that uses this technology to describe what things are not. I will argue that this app is an example of how play can operate to engage with critical discourses on technology.

Once this concept of play is explained, I will place it within the framework of modernity's epistemologies, primarily drawing on Law's (2004) STS research and Pickering's (2002, 2010) work on British cybernetics. I will conclude that play as an epistemology, and thus the method of play, fosters ways of understanding the liminal, the temporary, and the possible.

This article aims to sketch a theory of play as a method. The scope of this idea makes it impossible to reach satisfactory conclusions. In the findings, I describe the work done in this contribution. Future research will develop this idea of ludic methodology as a way of better understanding this world and other worlds that could be.

Play?

The first step is to establish a working definition of play to understand its epistemic and methodological potential. This is the most complex and challenging part of the project, since Western research on play agrees only on its impossibility to define. Therefore, definitions should not be seen as ontological, formal categories but rather as lenses or perspectives through which knowledge about the world can be gained. In other words, I am not

trying to define play here; instead, I offer a specific way to understand ludic activities. This approach, this lens allows me to frame the liminality of play (Turner, 1982) and how it manifests in activities, actions, and attitudes. By doing so, this frame helps me see how playing generates new knowledge about the world.

Each of us can probably come up with examples of play. Children playing with dolls. A game night with friends enjoying *Pictionary*. A flock of kids running amok in a playground while parents try to warn them about the imaginary dangers they perceive in their orderly unruliness. Most of these examples involve an object that mediates the experience, or they occur in a space culturally designated for play. My understanding of play is broader than this. Going to a club for a night out can be a form of play. Having sex could be play, as could flirting. Writing posts on social media pretending to be outraged, or acting on perceived outrage, can also be play. Learning how to drive, how to use a new power tool, or practicing knitting or embroidering or weightlifting—all these activities can be play if they become a practice of taking over the world for expressive purposes, where we can leave our imprint while exploring different forms of pleasure (Sicart, 2014).

Any work that tries to conceptualize play needs to address the theories that explain how the ludic relates to cultural and social expression. Huizinga (1971), whose *Homo Ludens* is considered the foundation of modern Western views on play, identified a ludic drive as the origin of culture. In his cultural anthropological study of human expression, Huizinga finds traces of play in various manifestations, such as poetry, war, law, and, of course, games. For Huizinga, Western culture stems from agonistic play, understood as a ludic drive that channels competition into a form of culture that mediates conflict. Huizinga's theory of play is mainly conveyed through an analysis of games, and his work remains highly relevant. Nonetheless, *Homo Ludens* has been critiqued and revised (Ehrmann et al., 1968) and should be read both as a profound insight into why the study of play should be central to understanding modernity and postmodernity, and as a reflection of its time and author: a white European scholar writing in the interwar period.

We should also adopt a similar approach to Roger Caillois's (2001) *Man, Play, and Games*. While Caillois's work primarily examines what games are and what their cultural role is, it still reflects a European humanist perspective, written during the postwar period and at the start of decolonization. Like all historical research, Caillois's insights should be understood within that context and critiqued accordingly (Trammell, 2023). Nevertheless, his analysis of games, his categories of play, and the distinction between *paidea* and *ludus*—the organized and unorganized types of play, respectively—remain relevant for understanding why we play and create games.

A canon of Western theories of play should also include Bernard Suits's (1978) *The Grasshopper*, a philosophical argument emphasizing the pleasure derived from being bound by the inefficient rules of games. Brian Sutton-Smith's (1986, 1997) work should also be central to this canon, as he organized most play studies that preceded him and laid the groundwork

for more recent research (Henricks, 2016; Sicart, 2014; Stenros, 2015). Other important contributions to understanding play in this tradition include Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) adaptation of the concept to analyze the phenomenology of experiencing artworks, Erving Goffman's (1961) investigation of what people actually do when they play, and Victor Witter Turner's (1982) examination of the connections between play, theater, and other liminal cultural expressions.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, I would argue that all these works share an understanding of play as a creative force (a manifestation of Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of the Imaginary). In broad terms, the Western tradition of play regards the ludic as an (aesthetic) source of cultural expression and social behavior, often structured around objects governed by rules that meaningfully constrain human behavior. These rules are frequently freely accepted, and people experience a sense of fun or enjoyment when they are followed. Play is then understood as following voluntarily accepted rules to find enjoyment within those constraints, which can also be seen as cultural expressions. In other words, most of these theories of play are actually theories of playing games. And while there is nothing wrong with that, it does explain why we have comparatively little work on toys or playgrounds, phenomena that are less easy to identify and to configure as objects of study (Giddings, 2024; Sutton-Smith, 1986).

This tradition of play research could be used to justify my argument about the epistemological possibilities of play. However, I find the margins of the canon to be more productive. After all, defining something as liminal as play from the canon's fixed center may be quite paradoxical. The center of a Western canon of play tends to privilege the men, the white, the central European. I will, however, use my previous work on play as a starting point, but only as a springboard to move beyond the canon of play and propose other readings, different understandings, and alternative methodologies outside the core of the ludic.

In *Play Matters* (Sicart, 2014), I proposed a minimalist theory of play inspired by the Romantic tradition of studying the ludic, emphasizing play's aesthetic and phenomenological aspects. In my theory, play is a mode of being in the world characterized by being appropriative, expressive, personal, and autotelic. When playing, we take over the world and reshape it for expressive purposes meaningful to us, deriving the purpose from the activity, not from external sources. How the world is reshaped is negotiated through a conversation among all players, ensuring that everyone is involved in the appropriation and construction of the ludic world. Different play technologies, from games and toys to playgrounds, are designed to facilitate this world-appropriation. However, the playful attitude also allows us to appropriate objects and contexts not initially intended for play, which are then reconfigured to support the ludic activity and its goals.

Bernie De Koven (2013) and the New Games Movement have influenced my focus on the activity of play rather than the formal properties of the game object. However, my existing play theory remains too focused

on individual agency and tends toward aesthetic practices. This theory needs revision to incorporate epistemological work and relationality into how we understand play. Additionally, it can be too easily co-opted for gamification, mainly for capitalist-driven exploitation (Hon, 2022). A comprehensive theory of play supporting ludic methods should move away from dominant discourses and examine the ludic from the peripheries, both geographically and disciplinarily.

For example, the use that Amazon makes of gamification tools to ensure that workers can meet production quotas is a direct outcome of the rationale of play in the classic Romantic tradition (Sicart, 2021). By turning dehumanizing labor practices into a game, these services engage in exploitative work by wrapping it in a discourse of play and fun that justifies workplace abuse. Because playing games is seen as being a creative act of appropriating the world, the application of games to exploit workers could be interpreted not as exploitation, but as liberation from demeaning work. Of course, this is a deeply unethical instrumentalization of play, but one that is at least superficially supported by a tradition of play studies.

Therefore, I turn to anarchist theory, feminist theory, and posthumanist philosophy to better understand play as a source of knowledge.

The anarchist basis of my understanding of play comes from Bob Black's (1991) *The Abolition of Work*, David Graeber's (2016) interpretation of Huizinga's work, and James Scott's (1998) analysis of the state's high modernist project. Black (1991) presents a compelling defense of the ludic not only as an alternative to work but as a way of life that opposes the regimes of production and control defining modern society. For Black, the ludic represents a form of freedom that is governed not by rules but by the joy of freely choosing to do something. Black explains carefully that this freedom is not unproductive or unserious. On the contrary, what is created through play endures because people care about it, having expressed their freedom through those actions. Therefore, play should be seen as joyful, free engagement with the world, defined not by the objects involved but by the voluntary freedom that underpins the activity. Play is a display of both freedom from and freedom to.

Graeber (2016) expands on these ideas in his critique of Huizinga and his reflections on play theory. He argues that games are the utopia of rules because they impose structure, removing ambiguity and guiding collective action. For Graeber, games perfectly exemplify bureaucracy. However, he emphasizes that play is not about strictly adhering to rules or eliminating ambiguity, but about the emergence of form through creative, free action. Games limit play; play creates games—and sometimes even destroys them. Graeber helps us understand that when we play, we see form emerge through the free actions of individuals.

Finally, in his analysis of the state's high modernist project, Scott (1998) distinguishes between epistemic knowledge, which is standardized and centralized, and mētis, 'the kind of knowledge that can only be gained through long practice at similar but rarely identical tasks, requiring constant adaptation to changing circumstances' (Scott, 1998, p. 175). While I will not argue that play

is a form of mētis, Scott offers a way to frame other types of knowledge that do not fit into the traditional epistemologies of the modernist project. Play as an activity is neither techne nor mētis. It contains elements of both, but the process—where form emerges through freely and joyfully exploring the world's appropriation—makes the ludic a distinct way of creating knowledge.

To summarize, from anarchism I take the idea that joyful play is a demonstration and practice of freedom: a practice that leads to the creation of new worlds. These worlds are forms that emerge from the activity of play itself, with rules that shape them and give meaning to the actions taken in those worlds. These actions are at the core of what I consider to be the knowledge created by playing.

I want to expand anarchism with Lugones's (1987) concept of playfulness. In her work, Lugones critiques Huizinga and Gadamer for their agonistic conception of play. Lugones's work is essential because play is not seen as inherently competitive. Lugones does not write about play but about playfulness. Her focus is not on an activity but on an attitude, similar to the idea of playing as a way of being in the world. However, Lugones's concept is based on 'world traveling.' To play is to journey to other worlds and existences we connect with. From Lugones's idea of world traveling, I want to adopt the concept of playing as a relational mode of being in the world. Play appropriates the world, but without imposing itself on it. In Lugones's approach, rules are necessary but not essential. Therefore, games are important but secondary to the relationships built through play. Lugones's playfulness is a life-affirming way of engaging with the world, not taking things too seriously, and learning about others and the world we create together.

Lugones's theory helps shape the anarchist view of play as an expression of freedom. The idea that playfulness is a way of relating to others and the world—having them in relation without trying to dominate them—defines what 'appropriating' means. Appropriation is not an aggressive conquest of the world, but the creation of freely formed networks of agency that collectively shape a world. That world relies on rules, but those rules can be adapted, changed, or discarded based on the importance of the relationships that build that world. Play is pleasure, fun, humor, and a focus on building and rebuilding the world that is being appropriated and the self that inhabits it.

I have so far presented an idea of play that focuses on the ludic as a free appropriation of the world, established through the creation of relations among different agents and aspects of that world. These relations are not dependent on rules; they use structure and form to create new configurations of the world. So far, we have freedom and relationality as central to the ludic. The final element in this understanding of play as the foundation for an epistemology is intentionality. Donna J. Haraway's (2016a) cyborg theory provides inspiration for understanding what we want to do when we play.

The idea of play as world-appropriation can be misunderstood. We might see it as a way of imposing new structures on the world: structures that appear to offer freedom but actually serve as forms of order and control

through rules that promise joy but limit the choices of its meaning. Therefore, we should view the appropriation of the world through play as a transgression of boundaries, rather than as an imposition of boundary-creating structures. Like Haraway's cyborg, players should not be 'afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (Haraway, 2016, p. 15). The cyborg is a myth, and as such, it can be understood as a departure from the high modernist project of knowledge through rationality and quantifiable scientific practices (Maley, 2016; Weber, 2009).

Haraway's (2016a, 2016b) feminist philosophy transcends dualisms and uses the myth of the cyborg as a tool to think beyond seeking 'unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end' (p. 65). The cyborg is playful beyond agonism, just as Lugones demanded. Cyborgs produce knowledge, but 'there is no drive to produce total theory <...> there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction,' because '<...> the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality' (Haraway, 2016a, pp. 66—67). The cyborg offers a foundational idea for a pocket theory of play that explains how the ludic creates knowledge.

Play is then a voluntarily chosen activity in which freedom is demonstrated through creating a world governed by rules and actions willingly accepted, not forced, and always open to change. This world exists within the real world where players meet, but it also provides an alternative through the appropriation, modification, and distortion of that existing world. This distortion occurs through the creation of rules and boundaries that blur traditional categories and suggest new arrangements of agency and being. That world is not just a space for play but also a place of and for knowledge: about oneself, others, and the possibilities that were either only partly accessible in the appropriated world or entirely impossible. The realization of these possibilities in a temporary world lets players experience, explore, enjoy, and learn from them, emerging from play with knowledge of what is and what could be. However, that knowledge does not produce major theories, nor is it outside of play. Play does not just embody existing knowledge; it creates a brief epistemology of the liminal and the possible, and it is up to players to preserve that knowledge and make it real even when they are not playing.

In the next chapter, I will make this play theory more concrete by analyzing a ridiculous software mobile app I developed to explore what machine vision actually does.

Probably not a method

The core aim of methods is to ensure that knowledge is accurate and reproducible. Any new ideas we experiment with and share must go through processes of thinking and refinement that make their arguments truthful. This process guarantees that what we discuss, create, and build are not

merely random outcomes of individual, self-centered misunderstandings of experience, but shareable worlds, ideas, and knowledge. This principle is threatened by the ideologies of the dark enlightenment and the greed of North American tech giants, for whom truthfulness takes a backseat to profit (Golumbia, 2009). Therefore, one of the best ways to demonstrate how play as a method can generate knowledge is to apply it to understanding one of the flagship computational technologies of the last 40 years: machine vision. And not just to learn more about the technology itself, but also to question the dominant ideologies that surround digital technologies. This project is also challenging the 'tech bro's' understanding of the world.

Critical technology studies is a broad, multidisciplinary field that examines how technology shapes culture, society, and politics. The growing presence of artificial intelligence technologies in our daily lives, along with the rapid global impact of generative AI across all areas of culture and society, has made this field central to disciplines such as media studies, science and technology studies, and sociology. The most influential research in this area has drawn on methods from these disciplines (Benjamin, 2019; Crawford, 2021; Joque, 2022; O'Neil, 2017).

What if we approached critical technology studies through play? What if the act of play, as defined earlier, could contribute to the discourse of a unified research field like critical technology studies? With this question in mind, I created the playful software app *Probably Not*, an interactive joke about how machine vision works and the values embedded in technology. The app is available for free on Apple's App Store, and a demo version can be found on the Ridiculous Software website.[4] The purpose of this inquiry was first to make fun of machine vision and then to think through how the technology works and what effects it may have, through playfulness.

The first step in the method I followed to create this app was to research what the technology can do. Machine vision is a field of computer science that uses pattern-matching algorithms and statistical data analysis to enable computers to produce probabilistic results from visual data (Goldenfein, 2019; Moore et al., 2023; Passi & Jackson, 2017). Typically, this type of machine vision relies on a large dataset of labeled images to train a deep learning model. The images in the dataset are manually labeled. A machine learning system processes this labeled visual data to identify the statistical relationship between the visual data and the labels. This creates a model that provides a percentage indicating how closely new data matches the dataset's labels. In simple terms, if a machine vision system is trained with thousands of images of bananas, all labeled 'banana,' the resulting model will be able to determine how similar a new banana image is to the images in the dataset (Joque, 2022; Pasquinelli, 2019).

In other words, a machine vision system does not 'see' or 'understand' the visual data it processes. These systems perform statistical calculations that link the data to a label with a level of certainty. A machine vision does not know what a banana is, but it estimates, within a margin of certainty, that the data can be assigned the label 'banana.' A people's

understanding of machine vision systems, however, gives the computer agency and knowledge: it 'knows' what a banana is and can see it. However, the truth is that it only 'knows' that something is 'probably' a banana.

While engaging with the literature that explained these facts to me, I did not quite understand how this actually worked. This led me to read the documentation for Apple's iOS machine vision libraries. In doing so, I learned that Apple's implementation, which is an industry standard, essentially uses these machine learning models to sift through data and then return an ordered array in which the first element is the label that has returned the higher-accuracy result. For example, when using machine vision to process a picture of a banana, the system would return an array with banana as its first item, followed by a list of other things the image could be but is not. The software is not *seeing*, it is simply performing a statistical guess.

Therefore, computers are never 100% accurate. Machine vision systems are very precise, but they do not always produce results with complete certainty. In simple terms, the computer will never have a confidence level above a certain threshold when processing and categorizing visual data. It does not definitively state that the object in the dataset *is* a banana. Instead, it provides a likelihood score indicating whether the object belongs to the banana category. This means the computer also states that there is a statistical chance that, in a photo of a banana, the object is another object, like a pen or a dildo.

This fact led me to think about the notion of accuracy. A machine vision system cannot be 100% accurate about what an object is because it is making statistical guesses based on limited information. So, let's play with this idea: is it possible to create a perfect, always-accurate machine vision system? My answer was *Probably Not*.

Probably Not is an iOS app that uses machine vision not to identify what an object is, but what it probably is not. Essentially, the user takes a picture of anything, and the app returns the third element in the array the machine vision system produces when analyzing the image.

From a programming perspective, the system is fairly simple: it sends the visual data to a standard machine learning model (ResNet50), which, as I said, returns an array of results ranked by certainty. *Probably Not* outputs the third item in this array—that is, the third-most-likely pairing of object and label in the input image data. In a layman's terms, the computer has a relatively low certainty that the object in the visual data matches a particular label. The pairing exists somewhere in the results; it just isn't the most likely.

However, this playfully means that *Probably Not* is always correct because the object in the visual data is probably not what the printed label indicates. So, there you have it, a machine vision app that is always right because it rejects the idea that statistical certainties equal truth.

Probably Not appropriates the way machine vision systems work and then distorts the results by creating a temporary, playful world in which the app is always right because it is always wrong in what it sees in the world.

But this also creates knowledge: by seeing what other things a computer deems possible for any object to be, we can better understand the risks of machine vision, and of deploying it in the world. It is fine if my app thinks there is a coffeepot in the reproduction of René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (see Fig. 1). But most machine vision systems operate with the same procedures. So, somehow, the camera on your self-driving car is evaluating what is happening around it, basically saying, 'Yes, that is probably a pedestrian.' And probably not a dust devil. Probably.

Figure 1. *Probably Not* a screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

When I demonstrate the app to users for the first time, they usually start wondering why the program 'sees' something in the data. That is, users tend to examine why the computer labels the object in the image the way it does. Users start to theorize and see patterns in how the computer 'sees.' In other words, my casual, non-systematic experience with *Probably Not* shows that, to understand how computers work, having them *not behave as expected* shifts the understanding from being told what is happening to developing curiosity on their own.

Probably Not explores how the statistical certainty models that most AI rely on affect the world. When we let an image recognition system be part of decision making, we are bringing into this process a system that does not have any knowledge about what it processes, just a statistical guess about the data it has analyzed. Additionally, when breaking standard computer conventions, *Probably Not* also points toward new kinds of knowledge created for users, not through traditional understanding, but by allowing them to experiment with how a computer works in a controlled, humorous, and ultimately playful way.

That is precisely how play functions as a method. Through the playful nature of *Probably Not*, we open up a new way to critically interact with machine vision. This interaction is not 'scientific' or 'artistic.' It demands an attitude toward things characterized by free appropriation for expressive purposes, with a disregard for rules. *Probably Not* functions as a method and a toy, serving as a playful tool for generating knowledge about the world.

There is a madness to this method

Everything in this article so far has outlined the concept of play as a method. The idea that play generates knowledge through action is simple, even as I push the concept of play away from dominant 20th-century discourses on the ludic. The play activity I describe here as a method is fundamentally a free way of engaging with the world for personal expression, aiming to break down boundaries and redraw them in search of fun and pleasure that are ironic and disrespectful of rules. There are other types of play, but the kind that could serve as a method is an expression of a playful yet serious blurring of what already exists, to assert what could be.

These are the key traits of play as an activity. As I illustrated with *Probably Not*, this activity can be used to develop and practice ways of understanding that promote critical engagement with technology. My app's grasp of the significance of statistical certainty in how we understand and experience machine vision offers a fresh perspective for critiquing the hidden, opaque digital technologies we encounter daily.

I have argued that we can benefit from understanding play as a method. Similarly, we could also consider it a part of a method, a step in other forms of engaging with materiality to create new knowledge. For example, play could be part of a design process (Gaver, 2009) or structure a critical making project (Ratto, 2011). All of these are valid possibilities that will be explored in other work that will follow this essay. I have not addressed the most difficult question about play as a method. Specifically, what kind of knowledge does play generate? All methodological and epistemological concepts are questions about questions that force us to examine the truth value of the knowledge gained by applying a method to phenomena.

And here is perhaps the biggest challenge of thinking of play as a method. Unlike techniques from the natural sciences or sociology, play

does not merely 'study' phenomena. In fact, play creates the phenomena it seeks to understand. Because of this, the complexity of considering play as a method is fundamental. Play does not observe phenomena that then become part of what it studies. Instead, play creates those phenomena. Artistic practice shares some similarities with this kind of knowledge creation, probably because many aesthetic practices involve an element of playfulness.

In play, as in some forms of artistic practice, the activity is more important than the outcome, just as it is more important than the props supporting it. Playing to create knowledge begins with but goes beyond the rules imposed on phenomena to interact with them. Play is the realm of the hypothetical, the potential, of what is not yet but could be, or what exists only if we collectively bring it into being through voluntary engagement with rules that we can break or change at any moment for creative and pleasurable reasons.

Answering what kind of knowledge play creates is beyond the scope of this sketch of a method. However, I would like to finish this quick introduction to play as a method by relating what play does to epistemological research. Specifically, I want to circle back and connect the idea of play as a method to the tradition of STS and British Cybernetics.

In his book *After Method*, Law (2004) questions what methods do to knowledge in the social sciences. Law argues that classic methods excel at studying 'the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable' (p. 6). He contends that methods create their own objects of study and are part of what they examine. Therefore, Law introduces the concept of method assemblage to describe forms of knowledge production that combine 'reality detector and reality amplifier' (p. 14). A more formal definition states that this method is 'the enactment or crafting of a bundle of ramifying relations that generates presence, manifest absence, and Otherness, where the crafting of presence distinguishes it as a method assemblage' (p. 42). This idea, heavily influenced by Bruno Latour's approaches, helps Law think about how the social sciences develop methods for exploring and studying presence and absence within actor-network relations. Perhaps the best way of connecting Law's ideas with my interpretation of play is to return to the concept of mess. For Law, the method assemblage is messy, unruly, always co-constructing object and process. Play is similar: always on the verge of breaking down while creating order through rules and structures that only exist while players consider them to be valid and that vanish when the activity is over. Play is a mess of agencies, objects, rules, and chaos. Like Law's method assemblages. That's why *Probably Not* is the outcome of a messy process, of playing with the fringes of what technology is designed to do, making an app that reconfigures what 'image recognition' means. Play is not a tool for detecting reality but a way of creating new realities. Games, along with toys and rules, become the instruments through which that potentiality becomes something that can be experienced, discussed, and reflected upon. The ludic method makes the actual possible, given a particular set of freely accepted rules, for a limited time.

From a slightly more epistemological perspective, play creates *knowledge of possibilities* by making them real through rules that restrict actions, limit the existence of that possibility in time and space, and serve as a free commitment to realizing that potentiality. This brings us closer to understanding the kind of knowledge play produces, but it still does not resolve its epistemology. We need one more step to move closer to answering that question, and I will take that step by using theories developed by Andrew Pickering (2002, 2010). The playful aspects of some British cyberneticians' work come from a blend of scientific reasoning and aesthetic interest, rather than a single philosophy. Gordon Pask's work on music systems and other technologies that interact with users through feedback loops was closer to artistic expression than scientific research. However, his work still kept a scientific outlook, investigating how the brain functions, how computers can perceive, and what kinds of relationships between people and their environment can be modeled using cybernetic principles.

Pickering (2010) describes British cybernetics as the idea of a 'non-modern ontology in which people and things are not so different after all' (p. 18). This ontology is based on the concept that the world consists of black boxes, and that the best way to understand and interact with them is through performative relations rather than representational ones. In other words, what representations a black box might contain is less important than how the black box performs in relation to its environment. Pickering argues that this relationality and performativity are what create cybernetic knowledge. That's why I want to conclude this piece by suggesting that the playful method is part of the intellectual tradition of British cybernetics.

Play as a method focuses on the possible, on making it real for a limited time, not on representing knowledge but on performing that knowledge. Any knowledge created through play results from the performative relations established during play, facilitated by rules. Play embodies the awareness of vanishing potentials, a way of understanding what could be rather than what is. Play does not produce an object or offer a representation of what is known. Instead, it enacts a temporary, fleeting world where that new knowledge unfolds, through the free collective effort of players, until play ends and everything stops. Afterward, what remains is the knowledge gained from play.

To paraphrase Pickering, the ludic is provocative in its non-modern method. It is not about measuring or representing the world but about establishing relations based on a what-if, which creates realities in previously unthought ways. Play is an unruly way to generate unruly knowledge while having fun.

1. See https://apps.apple.com/us/app/tastegram/id1598526379 (accessed on 24 March 2026).
2. See https://apps.apple.com/us/app/existential-check/id1659816000 (accessed on 24 March 2026).

3. https://apps.apple.com/us/app/probably-not/id1491823325?l=fr-FR (accessed on 24 March 2026).
4. See https://ridiculous.software/ProbablyNot/ (accessed on 24 March 2026).

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