The Playful and the Serious: An approximation to Huizinga’s Homo Ludens

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The modern study of play can be traced back to the publication of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s groundbreaking study Homo Ludens (1938). Huizinga's book describes play as a free and meaningful activity, carried out for its own sake, spatially and temporally segregated from the requirements of practical life, and bound by a self-contained system of rules that holds absolutely. Similar assumptions underpin the work of subsequent scholars, notably the French sociologist Roger Caillois (1962), who followed Huizinga in emphasizing the central role of play in human culture. Although its core topic is playing rather than gaming, Homo Ludens remains a standard reference in game design books (Crawford, 2003; Zimmerman and Salen, 2004; Fullerton, Swain, and Hoffman, 2004). Its core ideas also influenced modern avant-garde artists like Guy Debord and other members of the group known as the Situationist International (Andreotti, 2000).

Huizinga famously argues that play is essentially not a serious activity, but his writing is notoriously elusive on this point. What does the expression “not serious” mean here? The exact meaning and implications of this thesis continue to raise difficult problems of interpretation (Bogost, 2006). There is an important context for this debate. Many designers in the “serious games” movement have called for games that make a difference to people’s lives (Frasca, 2006). In particular, serious gaming is often considered a medium of education and sometimes also social change. Are these efforts incompatible with Huizinga’s claims about the fundamental difference between play and seriousness? Does the serious game designer misunderstand the essential nature of play?

This essay proposes an interpretation of Huizinga’s core argument. My aim is not only to make sense of the core concerns of Homo Ludens, but also to show that none of its central postulates actually undermines the legitimacy of serious game design. Huizinga, in fact, claims that most serious pursuits exhibit playful aspects. If this line of argument is pursued to its logical conclusion, Huizinga can be enlisted as an ally rather than an opponent of the serious games movement. A careful study of Homo Ludens clarifies the fundamental aims and purposes of serious game design, and also highlights the close connection between Huizinga’s ideas and key developments in contemporary experimental art.

Player Experience

The philosophical starting point of Huizinga’s study is the observation that, where there is play, there is also “meaning”. Playing makes sense to the player. Most games presuppose a player consciously aware of the game's objectives, equipment, and rules. Even the most primitive forms of play imply some form of intuitive understanding. Two dogs pretending to fight obviously understand that their actions are only make-believe, and this reciprocal awareness is an essential aspect of their pleasure. To describe play is to describe its “meaningfulness” for the players. Playing is thus closely akin to aesthetics, in that experience is irreducible: it constitutes an essential aspect of the phenomenon.

Huizinga sometimes writes that play is “free”, by which he means that the fundamental motive of play is the experience that it affords. We do not characteristically play to fulfill a practical task; we play for the sake of the lived quality that attaches itself to the act of playing. To speak of experience implies a vocabulary of qualitative description. Words like "tension", "release", "challenge", "effort", "uncertainty", "risk", "balance", "oscillation", "contrast", "variation" and "rhythm" typically describe the activity of playing as a temporal modulation of rising, falling and evolving intensities. According to Huizinga, the cultural study of play consists in a careful description of the players' experiences. The consciousness of risk, for instance, presupposes that the player cannot confidently anticipate the result of an action; this unpredictability largely determines the intensity of many games, particularly those involving chance and competition. To experience this sort of tension is to become invested in an outcome that has not yet been settled. It is always possible to ask: How will the game come out? The intensity of our investment in many games essentially depends on our consciousness that their outcome is not fixed in advance.

A superficial reading of Homo Ludens might suggest that Huizinga views play as a purely “subjective” phenomenon. There is some truth to this interpretation, insofar as the book insistently foregrounds the player’s experience. But the word “experience” does not refer to the inner states of an isolated ego. The player’s experience essentially unfolds within a structured situation. A child regularly opening and closing a door is already engaged in the performance of a structured action, although its rules are relatively simple, loose and supple. The lived quality of play depends in part on the organization of the player's actions around a cluster
Play is not characteristically undertaken to acquire some extrinsic benefit. The experience itself. For this reason, any function-centred theory necessarily fails to explain why people play.

Experience is inseparable from structured action, which is seldom carried out by an isolated ego. In most situations, the player confronts either another player or some impersonal obstacle. There is always a dynamic interplay of move and counter-move. A squash player must wait to see how the ball bounces back from the wall. This "waiting to see" indicates an essential feature about the activity of playing: that there is always something other, and so play is seldom radically subjective. The experience of the player is partly constituted by this moment of otherness. The player must respond to some event, in the context of a structured situation. Playing consists in a trans-individual process of action and reaction, which often takes on a to-and-fro quality reminiscent of dance. It is the pattern of this movement, rather than the psychological make-up of the individual participant, which fundamentally characterizes the experience of play. Instead of saying that "someone is playing", it might better to say that "there is playing going on". The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who strongly opposes any subjective interpretation of Huizinga's conclusions, has persuasively argued that "the purpose of the game is not really the solution of the task, but the ordering and shaping of the movement of the game itself" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 97). In Gadamer's view, the fascination of play lies in the way this structured movement "draws" players into its arena and "fills" them with its distinctive spirit. The encounter with otherness is thus an essential aspect of the play experience.

Methodology

Huizinga therefore assumes that playing is a medium where lived experience is organized as a structured situation. This premise leads Huizinga to draw important methodological conclusions. In particular, he argues that the usual methods of the natural sciences cannot encompass the phenomenon of play. The vocabulary of classical mechanics, for instance, relies on concepts like "velocity", "position" and "force", drawn from observed movements suited to quantitative measurement; but the lived quality of play cannot be captured by the vocabulary of mechanical motion. To say that play is "meaningful" is to say that, in virtue of its essential nature, it resists quantitative measurement and mechanical explanation.

Throughout Homo Ludens, Huizinga never substantiates his arguments by constructing scientific explanations. Instead, he proceeds by exhibiting a wealth of diverse examples and describing in detail their playful features. The book's content mainly consists of ad hoc descriptions rather than general explanations, and its research method is historical and qualitative rather than quantitative. Comparative description is for Huizinga the fundamental medium of cultural research. What is required is a careful portrayal of the feelings of risk, anticipation, effort and other qualities constitutive of the player's experience. This is the only approach that can capture the intensity of play from the standpoint of the player, without reducing away the singularity and intensity of the ludic experience.

Huizinga's critique is not only directed against quantitative explanations of play. Homo Ludens eschews any biological, psychological or ethnographic theory that explains the nature and pervasiveness of play in terms of its presumed biological or social function. Function-centred theories stress the beneficial consequences that playing supposedly brings to the individual player and/or her community. Many psychologists, for instance, claim that playing enables people to discharge excess energy or find substitute gratification. Others argue that playing helps children to strengthen their sense of self-restraint, to cultivate the moral or cognitive skills necessary for normal adult life or to build up and sustain a coherent ego identity. There is a very good overview of similar theories in a well-known book by Sutton-Smith (1997). These theories often share the assumption that the existence of play depends on the beneficial function that it performs. Play exists, it would seem, because it is good for us.

Function-centred theories describe play as a tool for the satisfaction of a biological or social need. This need is extrinsic to the explicit aims and rules of playing. The internal structure of play is only contingently connected to its putative function. The claim that playing offers a psychological compensation for some deep-rooted frustration, for instance, implies that playing could in theory have been replaced by some other behavioural technique capable of fulfilling the same function. This function is only a subsequent effect derived from playing, not an internal quality of the experience itself. For this reason, any function-centred theory necessarily fails to explain why people play.

Similar considerations lead Huizinga to reject the functional explanations common in the anthropology of his day. It would be misleading to describe play as a means to strengthen, for example, the moral values and social cohesiveness of the community. The experience of play would once again be treated as the vehicle of an extrinsic social function. The same function could, at least theoretically, have been elicited by some mechanism other than playing, and so the ludic experience once again becomes contingent.

Play is not characteristically undertaken to acquire some extrinsic benefit. The
essential function of play is the modulation of experience. The intention of playing tennis to improve one's health is not playful in this sense, because it is motivated by the expectation of some future good. In contrast, persons who enjoy the sheer pleasure of competing with others, for instance, exhibit a genuinely playful attitude. Exercising may also help to upgrade our health, but this anticipated benefit is not here the principal reason for the action. Viewed from a biological viewpoint, it makes sense to ascribe functional advantages to physical exercise, but these advantages are not the agent's primary motivation. People who play do so mainly because they treasure the experience of intense immersion that it uniquely affords. When pursued in a purely playful spirit, the ludic experience of tension, uncertainty or release is its own justification, not a means to some subsequent end. Play thus resists any form of narrowly instrumental analysis.

To be sure, Huizinga's argument against functionalism does not necessarily imply that all functional explanations of play are theoretically unsound. It is of course legitimate to inquire into the social or biological utility of play. Computer games, for instance, often help to enhance our motor coordination, visual perception and spatial reasoning. But the existence of biological, psychological or social benefits does not explain why players play. There is a difference between describing the functions that playing performs and describing the reasons why people play.

Player experience is the "primary phenomenon" in the sense that whatever functional benefits are derived from play often depend on the quality of that experience. It is only because play is engrossing and absorbing that it can arguably enhance the player's physiological health, ego integration and social identity. Play is on the whole psychologically or socially efficacious only to the extent that players derive satisfaction from it. The intrinsic value and intensity of play must for this reason never be left out of the analysis.

This line of thinking also suggests a potentially fruitful research agenda. Playful activities are sometimes co-opted in the service of coercive institutions or functional ends. Most modern nation-states, for instance, make sports training an integral part of the compulsory school curriculum. Psychologists utilize games to enhance social adaptation and regulate human conduct. Play thus becomes a tool to engineer docile citizens in the service of hierarchical institutions. Corporations sometimes introduce play techniques to enhance the motivation and productivity of their workers. Treated as a mechanism of social engineering, play is subordinated to such functional goals as the cohesiveness of the state, the socialization of the child, or the success of a commercial firm. Playing becomes a tool and an obligation. There is room for critical theorists to trace in detail the ways in which social institutions "functionalize" play for the purpose of regulating human conduct, in line with some rational blueprint.

Play and Human Nature

According to Huizinga's critique of functionalism, people do not typically play because they have rationally inferred that playing is good for them. Those who emphasize the function of play often assume that playing is motivated by a rational assessment of its potential benefits. But play does not characteristically rest on utilitarian calculations. Players are typically motivated by the quality of experience that playing affords, not by the expectation of some future utility.

There is a more general point to be derived from this conclusion. Huizinga also contends that playing is in some sense an "irrational" activity. Taken at face value, however, this assertion is patently false. Many games depend on strategic thinking and other forms of logical thought, and logic itself can take on ludic features (e.g., in lateral thinking puzzles and mathematical recreations). Can any sense be made of Huizinga's claim that playing is irrational?

Logic and play differ in their fundamental aims. The point of logic, as traditionally construed, is to establish unambiguous canons of correct reasoning. In contrast, the fundamental aim of play is the modulation of the player's experience. To be sure, games sometimes require logical reasoning, but rationality is always a vehicle for the orchestration of experience. Moreover, logic is not a necessary condition for play. Huizinga begins his study with the crucial observation that animals also play. To put it better: humans also play. There is play everywhere in the natural world. The author of Homo Ludens insists that child's play exhibit the purest form of play, uncontaminated by higher-level forms of reasoning. But even adult play is often alogical. Chapter seven of Homo Ludens, for instance, reminds us that word play, palindromes, neologisms, puns, allusions, semantic ambiguities, rhymes and other language-based games rest on formal and semantic associations not of a logical kind. The relationship between the anagram "Meg, the Arch Tartar" and the name "Margaret Thatcher" is not one of logical derivation. Wordplay often partakes of analogical or "lateral" forms of thinking. Sentences like the Biblical "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" or the proverb "Like father, like son" exploit conceptual parallels and repetitions rather than relations of logical consequence. Huizinga's favourite examples pertain to jokes. To "get" a punch line is not to carry out a rule-based derivation from a set of premises. It is more like grasping a gestalt. The person who understands the joke is able to see a holistic web of relations between the elements of the joke.

This emphasis on the alogical intensity of play does not, however, entail that the act of playing is merely a "blind" reflex response or a physiological process like respiration and digestion, all of which are operative in the absence of any first-person understanding. As noted above, playing is the act of an organism capable of grasping the meaning of her actions and those of others. It is not the output of a mechanical automaton. The activity of playing reflects neither a mindless biological mechanism nor a logical inference; it is supra-logical and yet not subject to blind causality. It lies somewhere between mere physiological processes and
Many modern artists have recognized that Huizinga's discussion of play goes to the heart of the reasons that make life worth living. The members of the surrealist group, for instance, emphasized that the most fundamental questions of life lie beyond the scope of logical reasoning and utilitarian motives. Surrealist writer André Breton, in particular, praised *Homo Ludens*, and noted that the surrealist movement was largely motivated by a passion for play (Andreotti, 2002). Huizinga’s suggestion that poetic wordplay and free association reveal the supra-logical character of play in its purest form is not far from the surrealist love of linguistic games. Crucially, the surrealists did not treat games as metaphors for some serious moral lesson or religious worldview. Instead, they made the artistic process literally playful. They often modified existing games. Guy and Riki Ducornet, for instance, designed a new version of lotto by replacing the numbers and images on traditional lotto boards with new collages represented dreamlike states and characters (Brotchie and Gooding, 2001). More famously, the well-known surrealist technique known as “The Exquisite Corpse” was inspired by an old parlour game, sometimes called “Consequence”, in which players would take turns writing on a sheet of paper, then folding it to hide all or part of the words, and finally handing it to the next player. This game exemplifies the surrealist idea of “automatic” creation, where the outcome emerges spontaneously, without a prior blueprint or plan.

**Play and Culture**

Seen in this light, playing emerges as a profoundly serious activity. It would thus be one-sided to read Huizinga’s study as a defence of the thesis that playing is unserious. *Homo Ludens* repeatedly cites games that require players to risk their lives. Can anything be more serious than mortal danger? Huizinga asserts that, in many cases, the borderline between the playful and the serious is difficult to mark with any degree of precision. Poetry “cuts clean across any possible distinction between play and seriousness” (p. 110). Children also treat play as an absorbing and essential aspect of their everyday relation to the world. To be sure, adult play is often confined to the sphere of “leisure”, and viewed as “not serious”. An activity may be serious simply because there is a broad social consensus among the members of a community (a nation, an organization, a subculture, a status group, a family) that it is important and must therefore be carried out. Most human societies treat play as an interruption or a break from the ordinary world of serious daily obligations. The freedom associated with play is in most cases linked to its *provisional* or *superfluous* nature. During carnival or mardi gras, for instance, many quotidian norms of social etiquette are suspended, and some laws are relaxed; revellers are allowed to indulge in public nudity or cross-dressing without fear of police intervention. In some cultures, Huizinga notes, contracts are no longer enforced and vendettas are postponed. Adult play is typically experienced as an exception, and is in this sense “not serious”. Playing is not, for instance, regarded as a moral obligation.

According to *Homo Ludens*, however, this segregation of the playful from the serious is not present in children’s play and, moreover, the distinction is not sharply defined even in adult contexts. Most communities, for instance, regard festivals as highly important and valuable moments of their collective life. Anything playful may become serious. And conversely, serious matters are sometimes also approached in a playful spirit. The isolation of the playful from the serious therefore remains tenuous. This conclusion goes to the heart of Huizinga’s thesis.

Most serious activities contain essentially ludic features. *Homo Ludens* does not describe play as one element or region of social life among many others. Instead, Huizinga regards play as one of the original wellsprings of culture. In his view, play is immensely valuable. His point is not that, in the course of human evolution, play was eventually transformed into culture; this thesis would still imply that culture and play are two different phenomena. Rather, Huizinga claims that culture is playful from the start. This ludic element is pervasive and fundamental. There is not one type of activity, called “play”, that subsequently turns into another, called “culture”. The heart of culture is essentially constituted by elements of theatricality, exhibitionism, virtuosity, joyful improvisation, competition and challenge. The display of skill, the pleasure in surpassing oneself or overcoming others, the pursuit of honour or glory or victory for their own sake and other ludic attitudes are pervasive. *Homo Ludens* was not written merely to mark a superficial analogy or similarity between play and culture. Religion, philosophy, politics and art all present an ineradicably playful aspect. To limit the import of Huizinga’s study to the narrow sphere of games and toys is clearly to misunderstand his core philosophical aim, which is to regard culture sub specie ludis, under the aspect of play. When we begin to view all culture under the aspect of play, however, the distinction between the playful and the serious often becomes irrelevant.

The main thrust of *Homo Ludens* is to demonstrate that many valuable achievements of human culture depend less on rational thinking than on a deep-rooted craving for ludic experience. Consider an illustration from the philosophical tradition. According to *Homo Ludens*, the desire to make a public display of skill by defeating an opponent through artful rhetoric lies at the heart of the teachings of the Greek sophists. The essential nature of the sophistic movement exhibits two playful features: exhibitionism and competition. Huizinga explicitly asserts that, when it comes to rhetorical games, the line between the serious and the playful cannot be clearly marked. Philosophical speculation about the origins and fundamental properties of the world is often recorded in the form of enigmas. The etymological roots of the word “problem”, Huizinga reminds us, reveal two closely related meanings: “problemati” were (a) shields used for protection and (b) things thrown for another person to grab hold of. The ideas of skill, competition and...
challenge are everywhere evident. The philosophical aporia or paradox, for instance, was originally understood as an enigma without a definite answer, often put forth as a challenge to a real or imaginary opponent. The philosopher shows her adversary's core assumptions lead to contradictions. Zeno’s paradoxes, for instance, were skillful arguments intended to confound his philosophical antagonists.

Plato denounced sophists for their usage of rhetorical tricks and linguistic ambiguities to manipulate the public into accepting fallacious inferences. This rejection of sophistry did not, however, bring the playful nature of philosophy to an end. The entire history of philosophy retains ludic features, even as it attempts to pursue gravely serious questions pertaining to the nature of truth and morality. Plato himself favoured the dialogue form, a fictional device that has close connections with play and competition, and which eventually developed into the dialectical method. The process of philosophical reasoning intrinsically contains strongly ludic aspects. Philosophical thought arises in a competitive process. It is in many cases intrinsically polemical. In this context, Homo Ludens singles out Nietzsche's emphasis on competition as a rediscovery of the playful aspects of philosophical competition. Philosophical games are not external adornments but essential aspects of philosophical activity. While philosophy is not mere play, it has nonetheless preserved some ludic characteristics.

Serious Games

The serious is not everywhere isolated from the playful. This conclusion has important consequences for serious game design. It is illuminating to clarify these consequences by considering two very different ways of thinking about games in education. The first viewpoint regards games as training or teaching tools whose main purpose is to make the learning process more enjoyable, appealing, or accessible to students. In this case, the teacher intends to achieve a predefined goal, such as the transmission of some piece of knowledge about mathematics, philosophy or some other serious science. The teacher does not consider this subject matter to be essentially playful, and so the process of playing has in her view no intrinsic connection to the core content. Playing is treated solely as a vehicle to maximize the "effectiveness" of teaching. An example is the practice of "edutainment", or "education through entertainment". This approach to serious play does not, however, sit well with Huizinga's general view that the integrity of play is perverted whenever it is made to serve social functions.

The second approach, in contrast, sets out from the conviction that many manifestations of serious culture intrinsically possess playful aspects. The connection between learning and playing is no longer contingent but essential. This is the core argument I am advancing in this essay: Playing can be part of the learning process because the subject to be learnt is, at least in some respects, essentially playful. The use of serious games in the learning process therefore illuminates the fundamental nature of the subject being taught. Philosophical games should not, for instance, be treated merely as efficient techniques to make philosophy more appealing or entertaining to students; the act of playing can become a genuine medium of scholarly inquiry into the roots of philosophical activity. Huizinga's ludic vision of culture requires a profound transformation in our understanding of what it means to learn. There is a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, using games as an efficacious instrument to teach science, philosophy or art and, on the other hand, treating science, philosophy and art under the aspect of play. The point is not that education would be more "effective", like some well-oiled machine, if its methods were more playful; games are not mere tools to make learning more attractive. The point is that the subject matter of education is in some respects already playful.

The first question for serious game designers in the field of education should always be: What aspects of the subject matter in question already exhibit ludic features? And how can a game designer exploit and highlight these aspects? The next section outlines some concrete examples that illustrate the point of view elaborated here. The examples pertain to the humanities, but there is no reason why the underlying philosophy could not in principle be applied to other academic disciplines.

Community Formation and the Magic Circle

There is a core feature of playing that offers a huge potential for serious game designers. According to Huizinga, the consciousness of play as a separate and self-contained sphere is often reinforced by the pervasive tendency to enclose the players within a spatiotemporal frame, the so-called "magic circle", which isolates their game from the more serious tasks of daily living. The separation often consists in a literal physical precinct: a chessboard, ring, arena, field, stadium, stage, altar, etc. There are also sharp temporal boundaries, a clear beginning and an end, which clearly mark the game off as a temporary interruption of ordinary life. The game unfolds within a temporarily closed world. Moreover, the existence of the magic circle is closely related to the existence of artificial rules or conventions that hold only within this enclosure.

Higher cultural forms also unfold within a magic circle. The temple or sacred area, for instance, provides a self-contained enclosure for the performance of religious ceremonies in accordance with strictly codified regulations. Many other cultural practices, such as initiation rites, require the demarcation of a special place characterized by temporary norms of behaviour that hold only for the duration of the ceremony. The boundaries of the playing field mark off the arena wherein the special rules of the game hold absolutely. These rules often generate ideal
definition of play does not necessarily cover all playful actions, such as the games in its proper context. In chapter one of Homo Ludens, he clearly notes that his definition of play does not necessarily cover all playful actions, such as the games at the heart of many forms of play.

Huizinga himself asserts that gaming often has an ethical import, and so tends to acquire at least a touch of seriousness. To play is in many instances to test the player's strength, intelligence, effort, persistence, manual dexterity, spatial reasoning and so forth. The idea of fair play also suggests an element of moral evaluation at the heart of many games. Huizinga clearly recognizes the presence of this ethical element, which strongly implies that the demarcation of play from obligation is not absolute. The institution of the magic circle is a core element in the ideal of an ordered life ruled by agreed-upon conventions, which lies at the heart of human society.

My suggestion is that serious games can address fundamental aspects of social philosophy and social science. Once again, such games would not be designed with the intention of making the subject more "attractive" or "entertaining" to students. The aim should be to reveal the playful features of societal institutions. Consider a game where the boundaries of the magic circle are not yet clearly defined, and its rules not yet finalized; the game itself would consist in the tentative and risky process of negotiating these rules and boundaries. A competition could also be held without a referee, so that all or most decisions have to be reached by the negotiated consensus of all players. This competition may even take place in a public space, without a precise starting or ending time.

Whereas both Huizinga and Callois argue that the boundaries of the magic circle and the rules of the game must always be fixed in advance of the start of play, this type of game would make both elements contingent on the decisions and responses of players. It remains an open question whether this approach would lead to a sort of Hobbesian state of suspicion and aggression, or whether new forms of creative association would arise through trial and error. Players could also explore how different resources, such as the internet, help to sustain or impede these emerging forms of community. The experimental emergence, sustenance and transformation of a community would thus become the core subject and aim of the game. Students would then write reports, keep research documents or conduct seminars based on their design experience, and perhaps modify their design ideas iteratively on the basis of successive runs of the game, leading to theoretical conclusions about the interpersonal process of community formation.

The magic circle offers many opportunities for game designers to address aspects of human society. A familiar example is Eric Zimmerman’s Suspicion, a conspiratorial game played in an everyday office environment where each player started out not knowing the identity of the other players (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Game designers aiming to highlight trust and suspicion sometimes take the radical step of rendering the boundaries of the magic circle deliberately ambiguous. Phone calls or text messages received in the middle of the night may be real calls for help from a friend or part of the game’s conspiracy. Well-known examples include the Electronic Arts game Majestic and the plot of David Fincher’s 1997 film The Game. This uncertainty can generate experiences that resemble philosophical scepticism about reality. The designer becomes the equivalent of a Cartesian evil genius capable of controlling, and potentially deceiving, our sense of the distinction between reality and make-believe. From the designer’s standpoint, the players become toys to be played with; the game designer is the only player who for sure knows where the boundaries of the magic circle are.

Sceptical uncertainty may well become a central topic in experimental game design. The experiential correlate of this technique, in many cases, is paranoia. I am not here using this term in a strictly clinical sense. Paranoia is a mode of perception that actively seeks out potential threats or secret plots. The perceiver is always ready to turn any movement into a warning signal, and to respond by fleeing, attacking, or decoding. Play is here underpinned by a defensive-aggressive attitude and an obsession with conspiratorial themes. In paranoid gaming, the player is led to question where the boundaries of the game actually lie, sometimes even whether they exist at all. The location of the magic circle is no longer taken for granted; it becomes the very subject of the game.

In this context, I would take issue with one of Huizinga’s main theses. He repeatedly emphasizes that, within the magic circle, the rules of a game hold absolutely. There is no room for scepticism. The player may reject the rules (for instance, by refusing to play) or manipulate them by cheating, but it makes no sense to doubt them. While it is conceptually possible to doubt the existence of a planet or the accuracy of a scientific model, Huizinga asserts, the rules of a game are a priori not open to this sort of uncertainty. Epistemological scepticism has no place in this arena. My objection to this conclusion is that sceptical doubt can sometimes become central to the play experiences that I have described as paranoid, and this kind of experience can become a powerful springboard for reflection about the relationship between society and the self.

Play and Life

The concept of the magic circle is perhaps Huizinga’s most frequently discussed contribution to the field of ludology. His argument should, however, be understood in its proper context. In chapter one of Homo Ludens, he clearly notes that his definition of play does not necessarily cover all playful actions, such as the games.
of children and animals, but only the higher forms found in advanced cultures. Huizinga recognizes that, in many forms of play, the spatial and temporal boundaries of the magic circle may be very loose or non-existent. Does a cat playing with a ball of thread or a child making bubbles presuppose the existence of a magic circle? People may play with one another over dinner, slipping in and out of serious interaction throughout an entire evening. Our relationship to toys and other playthings often exhibits a fluid relationship to time.

Children playing with dolls do not necessarily begin and end at a prescribed temporal point. They do not always establish a prescribed goal that signals the termination of play. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) describe how a child "can slowly and gradually enter into a play relationship with the doll. The child might look at the doll from across the room and shoot it a playful glance. Later, the child might pick it up, hold it, then put it down for some time." The authors conclude, to my mind correctly, that the boundaries between playing and not playing are in this case "fuzzy and permeable" (p. 94). It is important to keep in mind that this conclusion does not at all contradict Huizinga’s theses on the magic circle.

The question of the magic circle and its subversion is one of the core topics in the field of game studies. In the fourth chapter of Man, Play and Games, Roger Caillois insists on the vital importance of the magic circle. The demarcation of games from ordinary life is in his view essential to the definition of play and the safety of the players. To subvert the magic circle is to undermine the fundamental nature of play and the security of the participants. The boundary, he claims, must be preserved at all costs. Games cannot spread beyond the frame set by the playing field or the time allotted to them. Otherwise, playing would presumably degenerate into a source of compulsion and anxiety. What arguments does Caillois offer on behalf of this claim?

The heart of the argument is this: the various impulses at the heart of play can only be positively satisfied, Caillois insists, under ideal conditions that offer protection from the excessive virulence of human instinct. The rules of chess and other competitive games, for instance, ensure that opponents always start out on an equal footing. The rule that a referee’s decision is binding provides a clear-cut way of mediating conflict. Whenever the boundaries of the magic circle are destroyed, Caillois argues, the instincual intensity of play (presumably) threatens personal and social integrity. The reason is that, according to Caillois, all instincts are "destructive and frantic", and invariably lead to "disastrous consequences" unless checked by stringent social conventions.

The presence of a definite spatial and temporal frame helps to discipline and control our potentially perilous impulses by supplying a system of constraints that all players agree to uphold. This element of voluntary subjection is for Caillois essential. It provides a safe arena for interactive improvisation that offers discipline and refuge. An interesting illustration of Caillois’ thesis is the plot of the classic French novel Les Liaisons Dangereuses (Laclos, 1782). Two aristocrats who enjoy playing cruel and humiliating games agree on a plot to corrupt an innocent young woman who has only recently left the protected confines of a convent. Their conspiracy has many ludic features, such as the stipulation of an arbitrary challenge and the existence of a wager, but its outcome is clearly serious. Crucially, the young girl who is the target of this callous game is not aware of its rules and objectives: thus the distinction between player and non-player is rendered ambiguous. The novel demonstrates that, whenever the boundaries of the magic circle are undermined and the play spirit penetrates everyday life, gravely harmful consequences can follow. This theme appears to support the tenor of Caillois’s argument.

The boundaries of the magic circle, it would seem, perform a socially necessary function. They supply a context for the safe and reliable gratification of human drives. But we must tread carefully in assessing the validity of this claim. In contrast to Huizinga’s basic intention, Caillois clearly ends up reasserting a functional standpoint. The magic circle is good for the players. It provides a sort of “protective shield” (Apter, 1991). Is this a fruitful way of describing the social aspects of play? Caillois’ analysis assumes, without argument, that “human instincts” or “drives” are essentially destructive, and thus in need of control and regulation. The concept of “instinct”, however, is deeply problematic. It is difficult to find an uncontroversial or unambiguous definition in the philosophical or psychological literature. Huizinga himself rejected the term as downright meaningless, and Caillois nowhere explains what he means by it. He sometimes appears to regard instinct as a blind force in search of gratification. This view seems to echo Freud’s Victorian vision of essentially savage drives. But, even supposing for argument’s sake that there is such a thing as an “instinct” or “drive”, it is by no means clear that it is necessarily destructive or that it inevitably craves excess. It may well be that our “instincts” are also geared towards solidarity, empathy, concern and cooperation from the very start. There is no reason to accept Caillois’ pessimistic vision of human nature at face value.

There is a general point to be made here. The concepts of play upheld by different philosophers are closely connected with their underlying ideas about human nature. There is an ineradicably serious, moral aspect to all debates about play. Caillois is particularly concerned to put forth a view of human nature that emphasizes the tension between culture and instinct. This framework, which clearly echoes the classical Freudian view of a struggle between civilization and instinct, leads to a one-dimensional theory of play. By describing the magic circle mainly as a protection against instinct, Caillois misrepresents the ways in which ludic pleasures can fruitfully bring the playful out of the magic circle and into the everyday. Players and designers can work against the disciplinary function of rules. In the process, the element of danger may sometimes come to the foreground, but this should not always provoke us into calling for protective
measures. Unregulated street festivals can be perilous, but they can also provide improvisational arenas leading to innovative forms of spontaneous sociability.

In this context, avant-garde art offers many sources of inspiration for future game designers. A core contribution of Fluxus and other contemporary art groups to the study of play lies precisely in their systematic commitment to playful experimentation outside the magic circle of classical art institutions (Higgins, 1984; 1998). Performance artist Allan Kaprow, a key participant in those events, has given an excellent overview of this tendency (Kaprow, 1993). Artists used everyday locations—dingy lofts and basements, vacant shops and warehouses, city streets and parks, etc.—and each location had its own singular atmosphere that would permeate each performance. Instead of relying on a definite plot or finalized script, performances were "generated" in an improvisational manner, often on the basis of a loose set of general guidelines. Artists thus cultivated an unpolished and rough atmosphere.

This improvisational mood went hand in hand with a feeling of risk and danger. The performance could go wrong in a myriad of ways, due to the random intervention of external events. Artists strengthened this sense of risk by struggling against routine in all its forms. Performances were not, for instance, repeated in the same manner over and over, to ensure that participants would not gradually acquire habits that would maximize their feeling of mastery at the expense of unpredictability. But the boundaries of the magic circle were not everywhere undermined. Many experimental performances had loose starting and ending points. Sites were sometimes temporarily marked off, but borders were seldom clearly defined once and for all. Instead of simply destroying the magic circle tout court, these performances rendered it fluid, uncertain, and negotiable.

This radical art tradition has influenced experimental game design. The well-known locative game project Can You See Me Now?, by the British group Blast Theory, enables ordinary people to play on line against players running on the streets of an actual city, their movements tracked by satellites. The actions trigger feelings of fatigue, cold, and danger associated with the contingencies of navigating actual urban locations. One player described the experience in this way: "I had a definite heart stopping moment when my concerns suddenly switched from desperately trying to escape, to desperately hoping that the runner chasing me had not been run over by a reversing truck" (Blast Theory, 2001). Thus play becomes intertwined with seriousness whenever it moves into everyday locales and faces up to the possibility of unpredictable events from outside the formal system of the game.

**Performance and Exploratory Learning**

Serious game designers can enhance the playfulness of education by treating the learning process as an exploratory arena. Student players explore their relations to themselves and to others through the process of playing. The key word is "exploration". The designer does not create a game with the expectation that players will learn a predefined set of ideas or skills. Instead, the designer constructs a system of constraints, such as a simulation or a set of simple instructions, and then allows the player actively to learn by exploring and tinkering with the system. In each case, there is no prior "course content" to be learnt, no predefined terminus of the process, only a rough specification of the general region to be explored, and so the player's individual trajectory may surprise even the designer. Designers and players may become co-creators of the play situation. Learning would be thus embedded in the process whereby the co-creators experimentally explore and extend the medium of play.

Serious game designers can learn from the rich tradition of contemporary performance art. This proposal is closely connected with a point made above: Play is meaningful to the agent, but its aims differ from those of formal logic. The core aim of play is the organization of experience. Ludic experience can be channelled into situations that highlight our awareness of our own bodies, the risks of interpersonal trust, the fluidity of individual identity, the relationship between individual autonomy and reciprocal interdependence, etc. Two examples should tentatively illustrate some possible venues for exploration.

**Example one.** For his 1969 performance Security Zone, Vito Acconci invited a friend-whom he did not completely trust—to act as a partner. A non-swimmer, Acconci stood blindfolded in a New York pier close to the edge of the sea, with his ears covered and his hands tied behind his back. He could only walk by relying on his partner for support and guidance, effectively putting himself in the other's control (Godfrey, 1998). The performance thus enabled the two players to test and share their mutual relationship, not in order to fulfill a predefined "therapeutic" function, but in order to experiment with possible ways of relating together. The objectives to be learnt are not set in advance by the artist; instead, they arise through the interaction of the players.

**Example two.** The Korean-American artist Nikki S. Lee has taken up many different identities and, in the process, engaged with members of different subcultures. For each of her projects, she would carefully prepare herself over the course of several weeks, learning to wear the proper costumes and acquire the behaviour patterns of the target group. Lee has transformed herself into a senior citizen, a punk, a skateboarder, a stripper, a Hispanic dancer, a Korean high school student and a lesbian. These various projects highlight the connection between social identity and body performance, as well as the multiplicity of possible identities available to any individual person (Hoffmann and Jonas, 2005). There is a learning experience involved in the process of transforming oneself into another. This interplay of self and other is essential to this type of artistic project.
The study of play is an essential part of the human experience. The experience of the player is fundamental to the very nature of play. The core aim of logic is to provide canons of thinking that guarantee the correctness of inferences. The aim of play is the modulation of the thinking process.

Wherever there is play there is also meaning. Play also differs from logic in a fundamental way. The core aim of logic is to provide canons of thinking that fulfill some predefined psychological or biological function. None of these projects implements some clinical standard of mental health, for instance. The presence of such a functional objective would transform play into an instrumental technique for the therapeutic engineering of subjectivities, rather than a medium of open-ended experimentation. The connection between playing and learning is closely interconnected with the exploratory and open-ended aspect of these actions.

The essence of creative experimentation is that players perform an action not to realize some preconceived end state but to see what happens. Every experiment is an encounter with something "other": the participant must confront certain aspects of the natural and social world, and of her relation with it. Moreover, any experimental action can fail. The most important thing is not whether the experiment has come out as expected. As sociologist Bruno Latour (1999) has noted, a failed experiment is not necessarily a bad experiment, provided that the researcher manages both to draw vital lessons from the failure and to use those lessons in the preparation of subsequent experiments. The fruitfulness of an experiment is shown by what the researcher draws from it, and this is in turn shown by what she subsequently does with its results. The conclusions must make a difference in the holistic context of the learner's critical trajectory. The worst enemy of experimentation is the tyranny of model answers, which compels teachers and learners to focus on a predefined endpoint instead of on the intrinsic rhythms of the learning process. Teaching is seldom about the acquisition of truths. The main setbacks that arise in the learning process seldom involve a failure to hit on the "correct" answer or produce true results. It is more common for students to become entangled in unproductive, destructive or unfocused ways of thinking, for instance. A playful education would be highly sensitive to the rhythms of the thinking process.

Avant-garde artists have stressed the relevance of experimentation to the question of pedagogy. In the 1950s, the radical Danish painter Aage Jorn proposed treating experimentation as a form of learning, in opposition to the mainstream views of education institutionalized in the Bauhaus and other modern art schools. According to Jorn, the process of learning does not consist in the transmission of skills from teachers to students, but in the active design and execution of experimental actions by the learners themselves, without any utilitarian purposes (Knabb, 1981). Curiosity and risk-taking become fundamental values of exploratory learning. The aim of aesthetics, according to Jorn, is to bring students to confront and reflect upon their own experiences through participation in ludic actions (Shield, 2002).

The purpose of playful learning is not to improve the "effectiveness" of teaching but to encourage a profound rethinking of the essential nature of its methods and subject matter. The player does not only use playing in order to learn; instead, the player now thinks of learning as a form of play. The medium of learning is the modulation of intensities, because intensity is the core of its subject matter. This is the deeper lesson of Huizinga's approach. Its implications are potentially radical, and reach down to the very core of our teaching methods and our pedagogical philosophy. Perhaps the time has come to banish functional words like "effectiveness" and "efficiency" from schools and universities once and for all, because they stand in the way of a radical reconsideration of the core aims and values of education. This sort of vocabulary encourages teachers to think of education as top-down regulation rather ludic experimentation.

Students are not human resources waiting to be engineered but players with a craving for experience. Of course, this vision of serious gaming means that teachers should not only enlist game designers to implement a predefined set of goals. The act of designing games should be seen as an integral part of curriculum design. The teacher and the game designer would then collaborate in the development of the course content and teaching methods.

Conclusions

Huizinga's starting point asserts that play differs from blind physiological processes like respiration and digestion, because it presupposes a conscious player who understands the aims, rules, strategies, conventions and resources involved. Wherever there is play there is also meaning. Play also differs from logic in a fundamental way. The core aim of logic is to provide canons of thinking that guarantee the correctness of inferences. The aim of play is the modulation of human experience. The experience of the player is essential to the very nature of play. The study of play as play is directed towards the experience of the player.

Serious game design has the potential to reveal essential features about philosophy, science and other serious academic subjects. The reason is that those subjects already exhibit ludic aspects. Playing can help us to recognize the playful aspects of human culture. For instance, playing a philosophical game can highlight the elements of competition and exhibitionism at the heart of philosophy. Playing with the magic circle can bring to light fundamental features of all social formations, and so highlight fundamental issues about philosophy and sociology. Game designers can render the boundary between play and life systematically ambiguous, thus encouraging players to engage in a collective discussion about the nature of their community. The formation of the collective would then become a core theme of experimental game design. Alternatively, the game designers may selectively withhold from the players information about where the magic circle begins and ends, so that random everyday events can potentially be part of the game; serious game designers can exploit this condition to generate paranoia and other experiences that depend on doubt.

Different concepts of play are closely interconnected with different philosophical assumptions about human nature. Many contemporary artists have advanced a paradigm of experimental action that values improvisation, exploration and risk. Game designers can benefit from the experiments already conducted by members of radical art groups, particularly those designed to subvert the boundaries of the magic circle. They challenge the tyranny of gallery walls and other institutional settings that isolate art from the everyday. The performances of Allan Kaprow and other members of the Fluxus group, for instance, burst open the confines of artistic institutions, and destabilized any effort to mark out a clean boundary between art and serious life. Radical artists have discovered an essential feature of children’s play: fluid and porous boundaries. The borderline of the playing field becomes fragile, contingent and negotiable. As games open themselves up to the experience of risk, trust, dependency, vulnerability, fatalism, uncertainty, addictiveness and violence, playing may thus enable novel forms of subjectivity and interaction to emerge through experimental modifications of everyday life.

Game designers might argue that some of these techniques undermine the very nature of play. How can a game remain a game when its boundaries are no longer clearly defined? Once again, I would recommend a careful study of the development of modern art. Performance artists like Kaprow rejected the presumption that there is a distinct sphere called “art” bound by necessary and sufficient conditions; he organized his performances without any certainty as to whether what he was doing really was really art or not (Kaprow, 1993). This gesture embraces conceptual uncertainty as a generative source. Perhaps the next step for experimental designers working with digital technologies is to suspend their absolute commitment to some distinct sphere called “play”, or to some self-evidently distinct art form called “game design”, and begin designing frameworks for actions that may or may not be considered playful. This project demands a struggle against deep-rooted assumptions about what constitutes a proper game genre and game design method, and to cultivate an attitude of open-minded receptivity to the ambiguities, contingencies and potential risks of human play.

Huizinga himself underscores that the concept of play sometimes cannot be circumscribed within precise conceptual boundaries. Homo Ludens seldom advances rigid definitions. Huizinga’s attempt to “define” play in terms of the magic circle, for instance, should not be understood as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but as a tentative approximation to regions of life that resist exact categorization. Like a good historian, Huizinga does not shrink away from ambiguity. His entire study can be seen as an effort to speak as precisely as possible about categories and distinctions that cannot be neatly demarcated. Definitions are useful, insofar as they suggest common threads running through heterogeneous manifestations, but they are not meant to function as absolute categories. Thus play both is and is not serious. The difficulty lies in paying attention to important conceptual differences while keeping our descriptive categories sufficiently supple to accommodate ambiguity and vagueness.

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References


Endnotes

1 I do not, however, endorse the totality of Gadamer's philosophical framework. In particular, I remain neutral on his Heideggerian view of truth as disclosure.

2 Historians have seldom discussed the relevance of this conclusion to modern experimental art. Members of radical artistic groups like Surrealism, Cobra and the Situationist International celebrated those areas of life outside the bounds of scientific explanation and logical reasoning, and so found Homo Ludens philosophically congenial.

3 Many avant-garde artists have already noted this point. Members of the group known as the Situationist International praised Homo Ludens for stressing the
intensity of play (Sadler, 1998). The leading Situationist artist and socialist activist Guy Debord explicitly cited Huizinga’s influence on his passion for play (Andreotti). Debord not only used palindromes and other techniques that Huizinga described as deeply playful, but also created the classical strategic board game “The Game of War”, inspired by Clausewitz’s theory of warfare (Bracken, 1997). The Situationists understood that a play-centred artistic discourse is perfectly capable of addressing serious concerns. Inspired by Huizinga’s description of play as an intensification of human life, they denounced all forms of work and drudgery and asserted the people’s right to passionate enjoyment in all areas of life. They demanded that society should be re-organized to minimize all forms of drudgery by reducing working hours. They opposed modern urban planning for their exclusive emphasis on utilitarian questions like traffic flow, and celebrated urban graffiti as a playful re-appropriation of city space. The Situationists demanded that the freedom to play should not be channeled around the functional requirements of productivity, profit, and state control. They echoed Huizinga’s profound conviction that play and freedom are essentially intertwined, but they extended this idea in a radical political direction. Group members were keen supporters of the uprisings of May 1968 in Paris and other parts of France. Debord personally joined the students who occupied the Sorbonne and transformed it into a people’s university (Jappe, 1999; Hussey, 2002). For the Situationists, the concept of play clearly had serious political implications.

While describing the magic circle, Huizinga sometimes argues that all games somehow involve an element of illusion or make-believe. It is, however, difficult to see how tic-tac-toe, for instance, contains any fictional features. This game appears perfectly literal: players simply put pieces on a board, and there is no pretence, make-believe or simulation involved at any stage of the process. But perhaps Huizinga’s claim only means that there is an artificial universe of special rules that apply only within the sphere of the game.

I have loosely derived this rough characterization of the paranoid mentality from Klaus Theweleit’s discussion of Nazi masculinity (1987).

6 The fuzziness of the magic circle is not restricted to children’s play. Recent scholarship on “expanded” or “pervasive” games has highlighted three techniques that subvert the magic circle (Montola, 2005). First of all, the location of the game can be ambiguous, uncertain or unlimited, so that participants may not be sure about the place where the game is played. Secondly, the temporal boundaries of play need not always be sharply demarcated from the rest of daily life. A game may, for instance, lack a clear-cut beginning or end; or its duration may extend until it coincides with a player’s entire life, even span several generations, so that its temporal boundaries become effectively irrelevant. Thirdly, games can blur the boundary between players and non-players by bringing “outsiders” into its sphere.

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Homo ludens. A study of the play-element in culture. by J. HUIZINGA. Late Professor of History in the University of Leyden. ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL London, Boston and Henley.Â The high importance of this place and the necessity, or at least the utility, HOMO LUDENS. of play as a function are generally taken for granted and form the starting-point of all such scientific researches. The numerous attempts to define the biological function of play show a striking variation. By some the origin and fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of superabundant vital energy, by others as the satisfaction of some “imitative instinct”, or again as simply a “need” for relaxation. Huizinga’s suggestion that poetic wordplay and free association reveal the supra-logical character of play in its purest form is not far from the surrealist love of linguistic games.Â According to Homo Ludens, however, this segregation of the playful from the serious is not present in children’s play and, moreover, the distinction is not sharply defined even in adult contexts. Most communities, for instance, regard festivals as highly important and valuable moments of their collective life.